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Noli turbare circulos meos: Don't mess with my settings

Abstract: This discussion outlines the distinguishing characteristics of feminist technology and questions the ways in which many fourth wave feminists relate (or resist) their foremothers. The *raison d'être* put forth advocates that cyberfeminists must focus on the path of awareness over identity. The intention is not to propose a definitive interpretation, but to enable a constant shifting of positions, roles, pronouns, selves, discourses and fictions that continually intersect when engaged with feminist approaches and application of technology.

Key words: feminist technology, digital literacy circles, fourth wave feminism, cyberfeminism, GenderChangers Academy

Introduction

The question is “Can queer [...] be the seeding ground of a counter culture not simply court jesters to the oligarchy?” Penny Arcade (2014)

Cyberfeminism is currently in fashion, although it has been twenty five years since Donna Harroway's 1991 “Cyborg Manifesto”. The onflow has manifested in popular media reminiscent in art and culture articles such as *VICE* magazine's: “All women hacker collectives making art about the post Snowden age.” (Jan 2015)¹ In other sociological realms the trend has also been identified as the *fourth wave* of digital feminism.² Although it may be pleasing to have such mass appeal, much of the new wave's main purpose and goal seems to be reifying themselves into a genealogy of events, associations, names, and publishing images, traversing though

¹ Jordan Pearson, “All women hacker collectives making art about the post Snowden age”, *Vice Magazine*, <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/the-all-women-hacker-collective-making-art-about-the-post-snowden-age>, ac. 15. 07. 2015 at 09.40 AM.

² “Is the Fourth Wave of Feminism Digital?” *Bluestockings Magazine*, <http://bluestockingsmag.com/2013/08/19/is-the-4th-wave-of-feminism-digital/>, ac. 15. 07. 2015 at 09.40 AM.

rooms contained with Internet servers but curiously not touching them. While advocating for privacy and encrypted communication, many of these female-led collective activities are – ironically – virtually data driven. This is not entirely resonant within the enabling, consciousness raising, hands on, grassroots feminist movement that the initial “Cyborg Manifesto” (2001) was hailed for – that is, giving voice to the working class, ethnic, outsider, complex, obscure subjectivities it engenders. It suffices to say that the cyborg is maybe subsumed by second wave feminist values, while many of the same smugly agitate for *intersectional* feminist perspectives and *LBTQ* identities in an oligarch-like, self-righteous manner.³ In a similar fashion, Seda Gurses (2015) had recently reflected, “I wonder how in these exciting beginnings we can avoid the same erasing of the histories that happen outside of the colonial and colonizing imaginary of (sub-) culture”. It is true that when we feel accepted and included there is more room for others to be who they are, or aware of what they may potentially be. The main purpose of creating networks of solidarity and cultural exchange allowing for different subjectivisms is to avoid objectification by the oligarchy, as Penny Arcade (2014) insists: “The question is ‘Can queer [...] be the seeding ground of a counter culture not simply court jesters to the oligarchy?’”. Meanwhile, the many prefixes for gender are seeing a rise in uptake on defining one’s identity that seems to erode the critical awareness perspective that it attempts. As such, these confining totalitarian stereotypes delineated by the cyborg Lucy Tatman debates are in fact quite ruthless and indifferent to any agency or subjectivity,

“As cyborgs we have proven to be awfully curious creature [...] obsessed with turning potentiality into actuality [...] what happens is usually far more destructive and messy than we had anticipated, and we don’t seem to like cleaning up our messes [...] And anyway, that is what mothers and maids are for – cleaning up other peoples messes. (And here let me note that any cyborgs may not be as genderless as Haraway wishes.)”⁴

Whereas critical issues are brought forth, this text highlights the differentiation when cyberfeminism is practiced and performed on the ground through the generations instead of simply theoretically demonstrated in a constant stream of digital publicity about oneself; it seems more than ever that the “cyborg’s ability to remain indifferent in the face of situations that cry out for a passionate response” is a corollary.⁵ Passionately debating importance for the real-life tangible events which are experienced in female-led technological events, perspectives and networks are made that affirm sexual difference as a way to create a new social order rather than seeking to attain *equality* or *identification* within any existing system. This begs the question: how and what are less cursory modes of communication within this prescribed regulated realm? Why are feminist voices within this technological realm constantly regulated to a standard (oligarch) behavioural paradigm?

³ Intersectional feminism is a sociological theory that takes the affordances of race, class, and gender subjectives into account, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality>, ac. 15. 07. 2015 at 09.40 AM.

⁴ Lucy Tatman, “I’d Rather be a Sinner than a Cyborg”, *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, London, 2003, Vol. X, I, 62.

⁵ Ibidem.

Hands-on Feminist Technology

Hardware is a mystery, may seem difficult but is actually a lot of fun. While involved in hand-on demolition and reconstruction learn about masters and slaves, the difference between memory and storage and the components of your computer. – *Genderchanger Academy Hardware Reader* (1999)

The current questions around what a feminist approach to technology may be, and the distinguishing characteristics and benefits of such female-led events, will now be outlined by foregrounding our deeply-intertwined relationship with technology and the female-embodied position within it. That happens *in practice*, by first and foremost providing access to sharing code, techniques, and principles in female-driven events. Not simply relying on mass media, documentation or data outputs as evidence, but in the embodied experience and doing, it is to be sure the greatest mode of contestation.

Where once the development and production of emergent technologies was the domain of the privileged few, a point of departure for this project is rooted in the belief that diverse (and typically excluded) groups – such as women and other minorities – need to engage with systems and develop software platforms, but first events, according to their own needs and experiences.⁶ Within the feminist technological field there are factions driven by the ongoing friction behind the scenes, which is to not necessarily talk about ‘feminism’ or women in technology *per se*, or even women’s (generally marginalising) experience in software and hardware skills share and development, but rather to make symposiums about subjects more inclusive and interesting for women. Particular female-led projects have to initially work on making visible networks of female-centered technologists and how agency is taking place in other ways. Notwithstanding the polemics of the past decades concerning the so-called *tyranny* of the ‘women only’ tech event, the fact remains that most technology is an oligarchical-dominated medium that gives a very special place to such expedient behavior.

To ground the argument this discussion focuses on the work and the lasting resonances of the GenderChangers Academy (GCA), home-brewing anarchist feminist collective events since 1999. The name *genderchangers* is derived from a small piece of computer hardware that changes the sex of a computer cable. The metaphor was chosen to create awareness around the significant lack of women in the field of Information Technology (IT). Furthermore, the GCA’s customized experiential learning events challenge overtly goal-orientated, vocational and teleological approaches that are so dominant in today’s learning environments. GCA’s desire is to change the dominant gender of people who use technology, and this is communicated in the events this community produces. This is an international collective of women who deal with computers the hard way, in the sense that in workshops the first step is to open up computer hardware, thereby demystifying machines by cataloguing their inner parts. This methodology is still largely influential upon women-driven hacker space events of the contemporary world.⁷ The common subject of discussion is access to technology from the point of view of

⁶ There are many instances of this happening, but it is by no means universal and there are many different viewpoints, depending on the level of knowledge or technological naivety. For instance, one could argue PHP was the most commonly used programming language (or was a few years ago), but it is also criticized by sophisticated technologists because it is a language largely developed by non-professional programmers, and therefore Python programming language is the more ‘clean’ language to engage as a tool.

⁷ Some of the portal sites where related projects exist online: GenderChangers Academy (GCA), <http://genderchangers.org> | Eclectic Tech Carnival (/etc), ac. 15. 06. 2015 at 09.20 AM, <http://eclectictechcarnival.org> | Miss

women and the relationship between creation, information and health to empower, embody and embrace, to not to be victims of pirated software but to know that there are alternatives that are free. GCA projects such as /eclectic tech carnival (/etc) and SysterServer.net are interconnected projects supporting women's participation in critical technology. These projects provide opportunities to create long-term working relationships between different walks of life, artists, activists, and NGO training centres using free software developing tools for self-led teaching. As such, autonomous digital literacy circles have a precise goal in building an accessible common space for women, including running a server for women wanting to learn and administer them.



Figure 1: Harddrive or mirror? An undetermined object. (Participant at the Miss Despoinas GCA inspired Hardware Demolition and Reconstruction Workshop, Moonah Arts Centre. April 2010). Photo: Nancy Mauro-Flude.

In Figure 1, we can see a workshop participant enchanted by the view of the inside of a hard drive seen for the first time; she is examining this mirror as a rare object. These 'hardware demolition and reconstruction' workshops invite participants to break open the computer in order to explore the mechanism and to divert its use into entirely new directions. In the case of Figure 1, the computer hard drive has been transformed momentarily into a compact mirror (very different from its original use as a storage device for data).

The current topical focus of discussion throughout the networks is on feminist-run servers and various feminist hacker collectives as a way of continuing privacy initiatives on the topic relevant to feminist technology. The initiatives not only point to changing client – server relations, for instance user services in terms of encryption, and how people sign away their freedoms, which is a large discussion of critical computer culture *per se*. This also highlights the apparatuses we use on a daily basis that harness the unsuspecting user with vender lock-in

Despoina's Critical Engineering Space, <http://miss-hack.org>, ac. 15. 06. 2015 at. 09.20 AM, <http://esc.mur.at>, ac 15. 06. 2015 at 09.20 AM.

strategies and are successors to historical tactics for slavery, victimization and addiction. Naturally the author's direct observation and participation in alternative technological events has influenced the perspective.

Doll worlds

"The masters tools will never dismantle the master's house." – Audre Lorde (1984).

Women-only spaces are often used in reference to practices that are shared by groups aiming to question traditional approaches to technology – the focus forges an existence outside a common user / system administrator / programmer / master / slave / apprentice hierarchical relation. Avoiding traditional top-down methods of assigning value, the GCA-inspired approach employs and advocates home-brewed methods for collective gain (think of self-organized digital literacy circles). Feminist approaches to materials and form have an interchangeability that renders the specificity of traditional approaches and reception secondary and champions the amateur in the realm of the professional, also placing value in participants following their own enthusiasms to realise their imagined drives beyond a prescriptive identity. This model nurtures embodied methodologies and appreciates sensory learning approaches that are outside traditional vocational skills development. Different genders, different people privilege some sensory modes above others in terms of the type of information they garner from the environment, whether that is looking at form and colour, being more sensitive to the kinesthetic feedback from textures and rhythm, and so on. Therefore collaboration and active participation are crucial elements for experiencing and understanding technical functionality, and transforming that functionality into something unknown. They represent a dissonant logic of relating to a particular context and set of rules, where the meaning does not reside in the technology itself but in the networks that they engender – the human bodies that use the computer systems and networks and in where and how it is operated; why an incompetent *cyborg* or *bot* can fail to delve beneath the surface to discover the performance possibilities a computer has to offer. It is also well-recognised that a really good technologist (programmer, communicator, facilitator, pedagogue, user) is deeply engaged with the systems of the world; at times creative play will occasionally turn around and change the very nature of that system, utterly transforming our expectations. Of this, Elizabeth Grosz once stated the need to recognise and take initiative for that which needs to be created rather than prescribed in her warning: "this openness to the future, the promise of time unfolding through innovation rather than prediction, is muted rather than welcomed."⁸ And so there is a significant theoretical divide in the way that technology is conceptualised and explored, arguably, feminist hackers like the GCA unpack and interrogate the historical conundrum between the black box duping apparatus. By being interrogated, taken apart and repurposed, everyday electronic devices and computers take on a new role as they shift our vision of the use of data and purposes of technology. *But is this feminist technology per se?* Eric Raymond (2005) reminds us that "Any tool should be useful in the expected way, but a truly great tool lends itself to uses you never expected."⁹ Is

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 2001, 92.

⁹ Eric Raymond, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar", *First Monday*, Special Issue #II: Open Source, 2005, Chicago

it that feminist hacking of technology conceptualises a process of undulation and alternation, proposing a distinctly different subject–object relation to the one developed in a patriarchal culture through the isolation and depiction of objects instead of humans/mediums/materials understood as conduits?

The crux of the matter is in order to build on feminine ideas and visions; we need to create more women-friendly environments to attract women to participate in IT. It is sadly ironic that a lot of the new wave cyberfeminist discourse which talks the most about the de-centered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, in its trans feminist approach still directs its critical voice primarily to a male-orientated audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. In this manner exploring other possible ways of archiving information and controlling one's data by running a feminist server is of importance, first and foremost just to be present and hang out in a tech-savvy environment, hearing the jargon, and seeing people in action as basic research, an often overlooked but important part of one's first engagement with technology and the start of a path towards understanding the dominant role it plays in contemporary life. However, the issue of women's-only space is often a contested site of discussion. Furthermore, Fernanda Weiden (2005), a system administrator from *Debian women*, makes claims about occupying space differently, outside the terms of separatist refusal.

“[...] the role of the women's groups, to offer a friendly interface for women to get their feet wet and then join the community. The problem is when these groups don't have a clear target, in the end they turn into Barbie doll worlds that don't exist in reality. Instead of integrating the women into the community, they serve as ghettos, re-creating existing groups in the community with the only objective 'being more friendly' for women [...] The group helps you to find the way, but will not create another, separate way just because you are a woman [...]”

This comment in turn raises all sorts of questions concerning the efficacy to what was once a woman-only celebrated space. The motivating factor for these initiatives, such as events inspired by the GCA projects, is to overcome the digital and technical divide and support women interested in computer technology, in using computers and potentially even contributing to software development. With this comment in mind, specifically pointing to the denouncement of “doll worlds” by Weiden (2005), I want to consider the importance of critical and creative play. About the presence of the men, mainly developers and programmers, in this case, the *player* senses that she must adjust and adapt herself to the exterior world, and at times more importantly it felt “as if [she was] caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.”¹⁰ Female-only technology events give a seamless structure of the real flowing into a dream and back again. Grosz states that “We need [...] to consider very carefully the boundaries of what constitutes the occupation of space and occupying it 'as a woman.’”¹¹ The precarious platform upon which reality in general rests is an ephemeral platform that is not completely

University Library. <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1472/1387>, ac. 15. 06. 2015 at 09.20 AM.

¹⁰ D. W. Winnicott, *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena from Playing and Reality*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1971, 65.

¹¹ Elizabeth Grosz, op. cit., 25–26.

stable, but one that is also not entirely imaginary or unreal. If we keep this in mind, the doll featuring prominently in many female children's lives, serving as an integration object, then Weiden's comments referring to an inconsequential female ghetto or "doll worlds" are mooted.

Conclusions: between the real space of the event and myth

If the radical thinking proposed by Harrway's (1991) "Cyborg Manifesto" is to have a transformative impact then a critical break with the notion of authority, as mastery over, must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in the actual habits of critical computer operation, hardware demolition and reconstruction, programming, including styles and performances of coding. The GCA computer hardware workshop first presented in 1999 continues in many forms throughout the continents, simply to demystify the ubiquity of the machine itself; it includes *hands on* hardware and seeing how it works and all fits together. This simple skill exchange creates a deep awareness of computer technology alternatives by enabling women in different ways to take charge of their tools. Discovering how to use technology, to develop, to articulate its relation to one's own experiences and interests, promotes insight effective in facilitating information and skills exchange about computer technology options. As such, it privileges awareness over identity, still reminding us about the people on the periphery – the poor, the young, the fugitives, the precarious elements of the social body. Similarly, experimenting with technology in a collaborative manner in order to create new types of working spaces, Grosz states, "Artists and activists, pirate technologies in the pursuit of re-enchantment and liberated space."¹² Simultaneously, these female technologists create awareness that there are non-corporate options available to get regular work done for those that are on the poverty line. *Hands on* experience in order to develop a working knowledge of the material includes learning software programs that provide an alternative to proprietary software on all platforms (Linux, Windows and Mac). Discussions are held about DIY/DIT principles, access to information and motivations behind self-sufficiency rather than getting muddled in sexual orientation, prefixes or feminist theoretical stances *per se*. The use of free software supports such feminist technological values, whereas the use of pirated proprietary software puts one at risk of being branded a victim. Providing options and alternative choices, feminist technology opens up entirely new sets of possibilities from utilitarian approaches by playing with frontiers; such projects not only challenge a standardized conception of technology but also of art, code and design. Contesting habitual use patterns, this argument requires one more further consideration into the mix of what constitutes feminist technology; this is in regard to the "empirical attunement with out means or ends", brought to light by Grosz: "technologies they spawn proceed along the lines of practical action, and these require a certain primacy in day-to-day life. But they leave something out: the untapped, nonpractical, nonuseful, nonhuman or extra-human continuity that is the object of intuition, of empirical attunement without means or ends."¹³ That is, a feminist technological approach must also leave room for the intuitive, fictional and the excessive, in order to reveal the power of subjective approaches and how modding and hacking can arouse social reflection and alternate participation.

The discussion of female-run technology events and digital literacy circles have the potential to pose a new radical set of cyberfeminist models that in turn provide inspiration and

¹² Ibid, 83.

¹³ Ibid, 187.

new insights to creative learning and engagement with technology and tools. Such profound play with the limits of a given schema, even of the most utilitarian kind, can lead to startling transfigurations and unanticipated ripples of sway far beyond intent. These practices not only mobilise access and engagement, but also actively create an understanding of these tools as world-making in a literal (not only metaphorical) sense. In particular, this treatise of feminist technology is not only concerned with what is made, but how and why it is made in a shared adaptable environment that is aware, flexible and responsive.

From its inception the GCA drew together diverse ideas, skills and ways of living, which need to be rediscovered and developed in order to empower us to provide for our needs beyond economic rationalism to begin to nurture a space for exchange of experience that has not been circulated, or articulated into Language, as we know it today.

Arthur Rimbaud (1871) who dreamt of recreating life through his experiential poetic worlds – perhaps not unlike female driven ‘doll worlds’ – once wrote:

“[...] these poets shall exist when the age long slavery shall have ended when, she will be able to live by and for herself, when man hitherto having given her freedom, she will be a poet. Women will discover the unknown. Will her word be different from ours? She will discover things that will be strange and unfathomable, repulsive and delicate. We shall take them from her and we shall understand them.”¹⁴

Was Rimbaud anticipating the queer seeding ground of a counter culture that Penny Arcade (2014) so astutely observed was needed? The shifting and complex awareness of the networked relationship between communication, education, craft knowledge, programming, art, and activism, between the real space of the event and myth, is where fictional places are evoked.

Feminist technology events and moments open up a transferable space which carries its meaning to other places – places which as yet can only be imagined, that nominates a region which lies under the shadow of but is still, for the moment, outside of patriarchy. In the attempt to engineer equality in providing more identification prefixes, we are not going to end this imperialist supremacist capitalist patriarchy by creating our own oligarch version of it. And this is what is at stake.

¹⁴ Arthur Rimbaud, *Letters of the Visionary*, 1871, <http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/DocumentsE1.html>, ac. 15. 06. 2015 at 09.20 AM.