CYBERFEMINISM
An Annotated Bibliography

Cyberfeminism is an important school of Cyberculture Studies and Theories\(^1\), and has developed a series of key concerns, including issues of the body / mind split, visions of a society beyond gendered or racialized bodies with a focus on issues such as identity and social community. Cyberfeminism stands for political strategies as well as artistic methods and was most active in the 1990s.

This annotated bibliography is meant to be an introductory work and cannot give an ultimate overview of the entire field. I chose articles by researchers, activists and/or artists that either identified as cyberfeminists or have been closely affiliated with self-identified cyberfeminist groups or collectives. Although US-American researchers have greatly contributed to this field, I did not limit my research to US American resources. Due to the nature of the Internet, cyberfeminist activism is global and cannot be pinned down to one country. At the end of the document, I provided a list with further sources that are relevant to cyberfeminist theories but did not really touch upon my research questions.

My main research questions are: How have cyberfeminist activists theorized the new technology and women’s\(^2\) roles in it? How do they define ‘cyberfeminism’ and who are the collectives / groups involved in this movement?

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\(^1\) According to David Bell (2007), Professor of Cultural Studies, Cyberculture Theory entails a range of different disciplines from computing to philosophy, cultural studies to geography that concern themselves with the research on and theorizing about ‘cyberculture’ and ‘cyberspace’. It includes (among other things): work in computer science; insights from the history of science and technology; sociological uses, users and impacts of and on new technologies; literary theories and studies (i.e. science fiction and ‘cyberpunk’); philosophy of science and technology; feminist studies (i.e. ‘cyberfeminism’ or ‘cyborg feminism’); studies of art intersecting with new technologies, etc. (David Bell, 2007: “Cyberculture Theorists”. Routledge)

\(^2\) The category “woman” and its usage in feminist theory has been criticized among others by feminists of color because it heavily relied on the life experiences of white, economically privileged, able-bodied, heterosexual cis-women in western societies. Cyberfeminists have different ways of approaching this criticism, however, the majority has relied on this category.
THEORIZING THE SPACE


Carstensen points out that in the 1990s the Internet was a “contentious and negotiated subject within feminist debates” (ibid 1). In her research, Carstensen has identified three different theoretical approaches that emerged within feminist theorizing on the Internet. Her analysis is helpful in finding one’s way through the various feminist approaches to cyberspace, which is the reason why I will start out with Carstensen’s article.

1. Internet as “technical”, “masculine”
Some researchers have interpreted the Internet as “technical”, which is traditionally associated with masculinity. This interpretation derives partly from women’s slow or lacking access to the Internet. Other reasons cited were the male-dominance in discussion forums and chats, gender-specific styles of communication and the privileging of androcentric content.

2. Internet as a “medium”, “feminine”
Carstensen states that other researchers have drawn attention to the numerous possibilities of the Internet to create a countercultural sphere. They interpret the WWW as a communicative cyberspace that’s easily accessible and that corresponds well with traditionally female tasks. These approaches emphasized that the World Wide Web (WWW) could create solidarity between women and increase their participation and networking, let alone the worldwide access to knowledge.

3. Internet as a “bodiless space”
The Internet is envisioned as a utopian project for a world beyond binary gender roles. Many cyberfeminists like Donna Haraway emphasized that binaries between men and women could break down. The possibility of bodiless communication would make “gender swapping” possible and could furthermore facilitate the invention of new identities.

With her manifesto, Donna Haraway laid the foundation of feminist Cyborg Theory, with which she criticized feminist theories and activism that heavily relied on essentialist ideas about identity and binaries such as culture and nature.

Haraway’s manifesto is a postmodern socialist-feminist analysis of women's situation in the technologically advanced postmodern (western) world. Central to her manifesto is the image of the cyborg, which is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."(p.149) The cyborg can be read as representing the postmodern agents living with(in) new technologies as well as a metaphor for a postmodern play of identity. In her manifesto, Haraway addresses various dichotomies, i.e. nature/culture or man/woman. Since the cyborg cannot be limited to nature or culture, but is rather a hybrid of both, it cannot be easily categorized into dualist paradigms. With the concept of the hardly classifiable cyborg, Haraway touches upon feminist discussions about identity (politics), standpoints, monolithic categories and the problem of inclusion/exclusion in feminist theories and organizing. She asks: "What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective - and, ironically, socialist-feminist?" (p.157)

Haraways manifesto calls into question ideas of exclusive categories and rather calls for “affinity” and “kinship” as the basis of organizing rather than monolithic constructions of identity. Her idea of (cyber)feminism is anti-essentialist, highly critical of mutually exclusive binaries and breaks traditional boundaries.


Unfortunately, I did not manage to get a copy of the book. According to Carstensen (2009), Spender can be considered one of the researchers that have analyzed the Internet as “technical”, which they see as one of the reasons why only few women were among the so-called “early adopters” in the advent of the WWW.


For Plant, Cyberfeminism is about the relationship between women and technology, which is intimate as well as subversive. In her book, Plant traces women’s relationships to computational devices from Ada Lovelace3 to the invention of the WWW; however, it is by no means a chronological project. Non-linear, decentralized and non-hierarchical structures are essential to her vision of Cyberfeminism, which is also

3 Augusta Ada King (1815 – 1852), Countess of Lovelace, is considered the world’s first computer programmer because of her work on an early mechanical general-purpose computer, the analytical engine, a computer designed by English mathematician Charles Babbage.
reflected in how she organizes her book. Her (short) chapters have no more than two words and only give a vague hint of what the reader can expect: “ada”, “binaries”, “genderquake”, “disorders” and “mutants” are just a few examples.

For Plant, the digital and the “female world” are intrinsically connected. She draws an analogy of the female-coded work weaving and textile production (“a cloth is saturated with the thoughts of the people who produced it”, p. 66) with the structures of programming. By drawing on Lucy Irigaray’s theories about female symbolization and Sigmund Freud’s concept of weaving women, she uses different types of theories and “weaves” them together into a vision of a new society (see, for instance, her chapter “Programming Language”).

Her interpretation of the new technology emphasizes traditionally female tasks such as communicating, weaving and connecting. According to Plant, women seem to be the “perfect” digital agents. Thus, the new technology weakens patriarchal power because according to Plant, women seem to be closer to machines and their processes.


In their introduction, Klein and Hawthorne trace the linguistic roots of ‘cyber’ (which comes from the same Greek word as ‘governor’ or ‘gubernational’) and introduce the VNS Matrix, who were among the first to use the term ‘Cyberfeminism’ in the early 1990s. They furthermore give a short definition of CyberFeminism:

“CyberFeminism is a philosophy which acknowledges, firstly, that there are differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse; and secondly, that CyberFeminists want to change that situation (…) Cyberfeminism is political, it is not an excuse for inaction in the real world, and it is inclusive and respectful of the many cultures that women inhabit.” (p. 2)

They divided their book into three main parts, for which various authors wrote essays: ‘Connectivity’, ‘Critique’ and ‘Creativity’. The first chapter deals with participation, solidarity, activism and knowledge production in cyberspace. The second chapter offers important critiques of the medium, for instance, concerning the allocation of resources and the set-up of new technologies. The last part focuses on the possibilities of the medium, concerning ways of participation, writing and sharing information.


Unfortunately, I did not manage to get a copy of the book.
(NOT) DEFINING CYBERFEMINISM

Wielding, Faith. “Where is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?” 1997
Access via: http://www.obn.org/inhalt_index.html > reading room

In her essay, Wielding indicates that cyberfeminism is defined by refusal to define, which becomes evident in the 100 Anti-Theses that self-proclaimed cyberfeminists sketched at the First Cyberfeminist International. Wielding describes the profound ambivalence that many cyberfeminists have felt towards feminist history, theory and practice, so called “Old Style” (70's) feminism that is characterized as “essentialist, anti-technology, anti-sex, and not relevant to women's circumstances in the new technologies”. She criticizes the partly distorted view on so-called “Old Style” feminism and argues that one must understand the history of feminism(s) to avoid making the mistakes of past feminists. Wielding introduces feminist rebellion practiced by women on the net – cybergrrrl-ism and the Old Boys Network (ODB). In conclusion, Wielding argues that

“[w]hile affirming new possibilities for women in cyberspace, cyberfeminists must critique utopic and mythic constructions of the Net, and strive to work with other resistant netgroups in activist coalitions. Cyberfeminists need to declare solidarity with transnational feminist and postcolonial initiatives, and work to use their access to communications technologies and electronic networks to support such initiatives.”

Wielding acknowledges that the cyberspace evokes many visions of a genderless utopia but she argues that the new media has already established social structures, which means that sexism and racism have already been inscribed into it.

Access via: http://www.obn.org/inhalt_index.html > reading room

This article is split in two parts. The first one comments on the current state of Cyberfeminism and provides a short history of feminists’s ways of organizing offline and online throughout the history of feminisms and discusses key issues like the territory of Cyberfeminism, the separatist working and learning spaces for feminism in cyberspace and feminine subjectivity. The second part presents reports from the First Cyberfeminist International and provides a list of the participants at this conference.

Access via: http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm

In “Cyberfeminism With a Difference”, Braidotti situates the question of cyber-bodies in the framework of postmodernity and touches upon the politics of parody, the power of irony, feminist visions of science fiction and the need for new utopias. She argues that, “the nostalgic longing for an allegedly better past is a hasty and unintelligent response to the challenges of our age” and instead reminds her readers that “[t]he crisis of modernity is, for feminists, not a melancholy plunge into loss and decline, but rather the joyful
opening up of new possibilities.” However, she is also realistic and draws attention to the social dynamics of hyper-reality – class relations, racism and sexism are not automatically wiped out but rather intensified. Accordingly, Braidotti looks with “hope in the direction of (women) artists such as the Guerilla or Riot Grrrls whose “forcful style” and “raw directness” is a response to hostile social forces.


For Joshi, cyberspace allows for identity play but it has also led to an increase of discriminatory behavior due to anonymity. She is very aware of the digital divides (for instance, between western countries and economically challenged areas) and critically discusses issues of privacy and safety and also addresses power relations among women from different parts of the world. She contends that “cyberfeminists either from the West or non-Western feminists who have had a Western-centered education” have held patronizing attitudes toward women from other parts of the world. For Joshi, technology is essential to women’s empowerment, since “it enables women in grass-roots movements to effectively disseminate information on a global scale”.


This article starts out by a simple definition of Cyberfeminism as any activity that women engage in “other than shopping via the Internet and browsing the world-wide-web”. For Gajjala and Mamidipudi, cyberfeminists “share the belief that women should take control of and appropriate the use of Internet technologies in an attempt to empower themselves”. Both authors concern themselves with the questions in what ways women in the southern hemisphere will use new technologies under conditions that are empowering to them and within which Internet-based context can they raise their voice. On a rotating basis, each author describes their engagement with cyberfeminisms, development, and new technologies while critically assessing the “colonial baggage” of the project of development including questions like who can afford being empowered within cyberspace.


This German article defines Cyberfeminism as a diverse activist, theoretical and political field that aims at demystifying cyberspace as well as intervening into its production of knowledge. However, Peter stresses the fact that the term ‘Cyberfeminism’ remains “under construction”. She furthermore elaborates on the different strategies of Cyberfeminism and their curricula, including separatist strategies (i.e. women-only networks) and aesthetic strategies (i.e. those of VNS Matrix). She also touches upon “immediacy” as a strategy, meaning the collaboration and mobilization of local networks.
Access via: http://www.obn.org/inhalt_index.html > reading room

In 2001, Weber looks back at more than a decade of Cyberfeminism; a theoretical and political phenomenon that has always been reluctant to define itself because it did not believe in the “grand narratives” and essentialist definitions of the human. In her lengthy article, Weber gives an overview of feminist Cyber Theory, and defines cyberspace as an exclusive space that is inaccessible to the majority of the world population. Cyberfeminism was meant to be an intervention, a fight for participation in knowledge production. At the end of her paper, Weber introduces three cyberfeminist projects and elaborates on the next project for cyberfeminists the so-called “techno-feminism” of the 21st century. “Techno feminism” is interdisciplinary and intervenes into many different fields such as robotics, bioinformatics or artificial intelligence.

Access via: http://www.obn.org/inhalt_index.html > reading room

In her article, Draude refers to the refusal of cyberfeminists to define the term ‘Cyberfeminism’ in order to draw attention to the reflexive critical practices of cyberfeminists who have questioned monolithic assumptions of what it means to be a feminist. According to Draude, Cyberfeminism is a set of practices, approaches and negotiations that are in constant reconfiguration and subject to change. Cyberfeminism constitutes an “entry point” to debates surrounding women/feminism and new technologies.

Draude points out that the increasing participation of women in the WWW is important; yet it is not enough: Cyberspace needs a critical examination of inequities in terms of access, voice and participation. Advocating cyberfeminist values, therefore, means active participation, agency, and a say in the production of technology and design and not only “the possibility to do online-shopping”. Thus Cyberfeminism is about attacking stereotypical representations of gender and about fighting the myth of a “male” technology.

Nevertheless, Draude directs our attention to the fact that most cyberfeminist theorists and activists have a rather privileged position (they are university educated and economically privileged). On the other hand, the producers of ‘our’ technology are mostly women workers from the global south who make the digital revolution for women in ‘western’ countries possible. Although these women are engaged in the production of technology – as cyberfeminist have hoped for - their wages are incredibly low and they live in mostly precarious situations. According to Draude, cyberfeminists need to reflect in these issues in the process of their research.

Access via: http://constantvzw.org/verlag/spip.php?page=article&id_article=14&mot_filtre=2&id_lang=0#

Sollfrank provides a short history of cyberfeminism and introduces the Cyberfeminist International, the Old Boys Network (OBN) and explains why Cyberfeminism cannot be considered a movement. She also comments on the reluctance to define Cyberfeminism:
“The idea behind not to define the term, was to communicate the notion of openness. Instead of expressing concrete political goals our intention was, to bring diverse and contradictory approaches together on the same platform and make the differences productive through confrontation, a principle we later called ‘politics of dissent’. “

Sollfrank, Cornelia: “The Truth about Cyberfeminism.” (year unknown)
Access via: http://www.obn.org/inhalt_index.html > reading room

Sollfrank draws attention to the fact that the activists participating in the First Cyberfeminist International, a conference which took place in September 1997 in Kassel (Germany), agreed not to define the term Cyberfeminism. Instead, they wrote the 100 Anti-Theses. Sollfrank reflects on the history of Cyberfeminism, which, according to her, dates back to 1992. She explains that independently from each other the English cultural theorist Sadie Plant and the Australian artists' group VNS Matrix started to use the term. Sollfrank points out that Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” is considered by many to be the actual starting point for cyberfeminist thinking. She concludes by summarizing that Cyberfeminism “does not express itself in single, individual approaches but in the differences and spaces in between.” It functions as a unifying moment and “creates the myth of a political identity without forcing anyone to strive for it”.

Fernández, María. “Is Cyberfeminism Colorblind?” 2002
Access via: http://www.artwomen.org/cyberfems/fernandez/fernandez1.htm

In her short article, Fernandez critically assesses the claim by Cyberfeminism to function as an inclusive movement. She points out that the term ‘Cyberfeminism’ was “confined to the work of predominantly white artists and theorists in Australia, Europe and the United States”. Although cyberfeminist groups like VNS Matrix or the third Cyberfeminist International in 2002 made an attempt to include voices from marginalized indigenous and/or aboriginal groups, discussions about racism, whiteness and an engagement with postcolonial ideas were oftentimes silenced and/or ignored. One of the consequences was the founding of subRosa.

Access via: http://www.artwomen.org/cyberfems/guertin/guertin1.htm

In her short article, Guertin comments on the advent of Cyberfeminism and the false dichotomy between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’. She defines cyberspace as relational because “the virtual is informed by real as much as the real is by the virtual”. Cyberfeminists have challenged this prior claim in order to reinsert feminists into the “simulated realms as interactive agents”. Guertin defines Cyberfeminism as hybrid, which can never be considered as a “whole”. In her words, Cyberfeminisms are a “celebration of multiplicity, collaborative forces and uncontained bodies.”
GROUPS / COLLECTIVES / ACTIVISTS

VNX Matrix

The VNX Matrix was an Australian artist collective founded in 1991 on a “mission to hijack the tools of the techno-cowboys and remap technoculture with a feminist bent”. In 1991, they wrote the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*. According to the group, which consisted of four activists that have been credited as being among the first that used the term Cyberfeminism, the manifesto quickly “reproduced virally and has been translated into Japanese, Italian, French, Spanish, German, Russian and Finnish.” In 1996, they wrote another piece, the “bitch mutant manifesto”, which can be accessed here: http://www.obn.org/reading_room/manifestos/html/bitch.html

Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century

We are the modern cunt
positive anti reason
unbounded unleashed unforgiving
we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt
we believe in jouissance and madness holiness and poetry
we are the virus of the new world disorder
rupturing the symbolic from within
saboteurs of big daddy mainframe
the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix
the VNS MATRIX
terminators of the moral code mercenaries of slime
go down on the altar of abjection
probing the visceral temple we speak in tongues
infiltrating disrupting disseminating
corrupting the discourse
we are the future cunt

Old Boys Network (OBN)
Access via: http://www.obn.org/

Usually, the term ‘Old Boys Network’ is used as an “idiom, a metaphor to describe an informal interrelation of men (…) Nowadays, ‘Old Boys Network’ may also be in use for: a cyberfeminist network, a brand for cyberfeminist activities, a dangerous cyberfeminist virus... [to be continued].” (see: FAQ http://www.obn.org/)
According to their official homepage
“OBN stands for Old Boys Network. OBN is regarded as the first international Cyberfeminist alliance and was founded in 1997 in Berlin. Since the early days the network keeps changing due to changing members. OBN is a real and a virtual coalition of Cyberfeminists. Under the umbrella of the term 'Cyberfeminism', OBN contributes to the critical discourse on new media, especially focussing on its gender-specific aspects.”

OBN’s agreement on dealing with gender has been to only accept ‘women’ in the network, which is by their definition everyone who calls herself ‘woman’, independently from her biological basis.

The Cyberfeminist International (conferences)

The First Cyberfeminist International was organized by the Old Boys Network and took place in Kassel, Sept 21 - 28, 1997 and was based on the idea of an ‘open stage’, which means that everyone could come and present his/her approach to cyberfeminism. The activists, theorists and artists agreed on not defining the term cyberfeminism. The strategy of keeping the term as open as possible was consensual. As a substitute for a definition The First Cyberfeminist International formulated the 100 Anti-Theses

The second conference was titled “Next Cyberfeminist International”, and took place in Rotterdam in April 1999. Unlike the first, it was not an open stage, but a group of 7 women had put together a program which was structured in three different topics : "Hacking as method and metaphor", "Split bodies and fluid gender: the cutting edge of information technology", and "Feminist Activism/ Resistance/ Intervention/ Globalism". The procedure of putting the program together and selecting speakers was a mix of sending out an open call and of own search for contributors.
(see: http://constantvzw.org/verlag/spip.php?page=article&id_article=14&mot_filtre=2&id_lang=0#)

The third conference, the “very Cyberfeminist International” took place in December 2002 in Hamburg, and with its more than 60 active participants was the biggest cyberfeminist conference so far. It consisted of three parts, and included many new and controversial Cyberfeminist visions. The main section was titled ‘new border concepts’ and contained twelve presentations, ranging from feminist indymedia work and cyberfeminist hardware tactics, theories about feminist/cyberfeminist collaborations and bio-media ethics to ‘the female seat in the mexican underground network’. An extra session, which had been added after September 11, was titled ‘New border of terror’, and was dedicated to discussing the relation between current world politics (the war in Afghanistan), and the role of women.
(see: http://constantvzw.org/verlag/spip.php?page=article&id_article=14&mot_filtre=2&id_lang=0#)

100 Anti-Theses

The Anti-Theses are a collection of 100 short sentences what cyberfeminism is not. It represents a refusal to define the term. The Anti-Theses are written primarily in English but include several other languages in line with the aspiration that “cyberfeminism has not only one language” (100th Anti-Thesis) denoting
cyberfeminism as an international movement. This combination of serious real world action mixed with a good dose of irony and sense of fun is also evident in many cyberfeminist artworks.

**subRosa**
Access via: http://www.cyberfeminism.net/about.html

subRosa was founded by among others Faith Wielding and María Fernández in response to the lack of discussions about racism and whiteness within the cyberfeminist community.

“subRosa is a mutable (cyber)feminist art collective combining art, social activism and politics to explore and critique the intersections of information and bio technologies on women’s bodies, lives and work. Since its founding in 1998, subRosa has developed situated, trans-disciplinary, performative, and discursive practices that create open-ended environments where participants engage with objects, texts, digital technologies, and critical learning experiences interacting with each other and the artists. subRosa has performed, exhibited, lectured and published in the USA, Spain, Britain, Holland, Germany, Croatia, Macedonia, Mexico, Canada, Slovenia, and Singapore (…)”

**Faces**
Access via: http://www.faces-l.net/

The faces list began operation in the Spring of 1997, a pragmatic response to the needs of a small but growing number of women in media. Initiated after a series of discussions that took place on the margins of European media arts and media culture events, via email, and in the dimly lit corners of bars begged the question "Where are the women?" This constant question, and the desire to find out what women were doing with new media defined a gap in the existing structures and networks. Parallel to these discussions, the Face Settings project began to create informal settings that invited women to come to the table for a good meal and to discuss their work. It was the start to what would become an international network of women in media: artists, programmers, theorists, designers, curators, activists & djs, along with with an assortment of other digital workers.
Further articles and books


