Barbara Paul

Media Art Sciences & Feminist Theories: New Alliances?

The old and odd discussion concerning "high art" versus "low culture" may indeed be alive and well in mainstream art history, as well as in an advanced media art history and/or media art sciences. I do not wish to force this issue, as media art or so called new media art has been classified as art in a broad sense - that is not the question. The recent discourse on cyberfeminism, for example, shows that the category of gender is neither obsolete nor are representations of the (virtual) body the playground of gendered structures. For this reason it is particularly interesting to 1. recapitulate feminist theories, 2. explore three works of (feminist) media art and 3. open up thoughts on new and/or old methods and forms of institutionalization to discussion.

1. Feminist Theories

A. Feminist criticism of representation has in recent times focused in particular on the discursive practices surrounding the patterns of meaning culturally assigned to the categories sex and gender, and accordingly on the processes of signification, often justifiably characterized as ideological. In this context, the theory of the performativity of gender identities, as established in the 1990s by the scholar *Judith Butler*, takes on key significance.[1] Butler sees gender identities neither as a preset and fixed act, nor as one that is ever completed, but rather as a series of acts that are performed over and over on an ongoing basis. Gender identities that are characterized as performative are thereby continually being marked anew and equipped with the power to repeatedly destabilize

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[1] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, London and New York 1990.

the hegemonic and constrainedly heterosexual gender discourse, or at least counteract it by offering an alternative. A consequence of the theoretical discussions of the performativity of gender identities is the ability to pinpoint the artistic strategy of gender transgressions. The key issue is to mark alternative gender categorizations that are no longer transfixed by this dualism and to blur, transcend and shift traditional gender boundaries, limitations and delineations.

This problem is heightened particularly in the case of netart, as the merely alleged gender neutrality of the internet is often stubbornly defended. However, the internet is in no way value-neutral as regards other systems of regulation, such as nation and territory, social classification and age, etc. Virtual space, software surfaces, and even hardware have been vested with new and/or old utopias with little or no regard for the metaphorical connotations assigned to them or their ability to acquire these connotations. Cyberfeminists are responding, to put it positively, to current attempts to destabilize and overstep the bounds of traditional perceptions in the context of globalization processes, as well as to increasing outcroppings of neo-liberalism by taking positions on cultural ideas involving politics and work, consumption and the body, gender and sexuality, to mention only a few. Oftentimes gender hierarchies and power relationships having a discursive impact are, however, affirmed in cyberfeminist works of netart despite their possible subversive or even revolutionary intentions, triggering, in any event, shifts within an all too narrow field of myths and myth construction. *I will come back to this in the second part of my paper.*

B. More recent feminist theories have also endeavored, among other things, to forge links between perspectives in gender studies and those in post colonial studies. Voices critical of white supremacy have been getting ever louder ever since the mid-1990s. Feminist movements of the 1970s have been recognized as being implicitly racist, with whiteness as an unmarked privilege. With the intention of encouraging a multi-cultural feminism, in 1998 *Ella Shohat* expressed her support for "situated practices", aimed at a politically and culturally motivated transformation of all hegemonically structured epistemologies and possibilities for action. She emphasized an entire "set of situated practices" in contrast to the sometimes very elitist discourses of art in academia and in the art world which are all too fixated on words and images. She identifies complex

issues, such as canon formation and strategies of inclusion and exclusion, identity politics and the criticism of hegemonic feminism that is marked by "racing" and "queering", political correctness and the lack of civil disobedience, as well as crossing, moving and removing boundaries.[2] The overarching issue is to continually redefine the field of debate, going beyond traditional dichotomies of research and activism, art history and art. These perspectives of forced agency are very much in demand in today's world-wide-web culture.

C. The concept of transversalism should be emphasized in this context as a model of feminist politics. According to *Nira Yuval-Davis*, who put forth this idea in 1997, the model of transversal politics is aimed at establishing a specific policy of alliances in which the various positions of the individuals and groupings involved, including the underlying value systems, would be reciprocally recognized.[3] This form of transversal dialog can also be framed as an agreement in which individual positions are explicitly to be included. However, at the same time, other points of view are to be considered. Another goal is to draw the lines of action. The key feminist issue in all of this is to minimize current dichotomies and hierarchization as a framework of action and to maximize the political participation of women. Individual positions are to be brought in within the context of dialog and by establishing coalitions, and additional different meaning-creating ideas are to be supported in exchange.
A connection is visible in some internet artwork to the feminist positions on performativity, situated practices and transversal politics.

2. Media Art
A. German artists *Claudia Reiche and Helene Oldenburg* for example have responded to the supposed gender neutrality of the internet by presenting their 1999 collaborative netart gallery project *Mars Patent*, a platform for female artists featuring submissions,

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[2] Ella Shohat, Introduction, in: Ella Shohat (Ed.), *Talking Visions. Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, Cambridge/MA and London 1998 (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York: Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art Bd. 5), 1-62, 1-4.

[3] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, London 1997, see last chapter „Transversal Politics".

comments and controversial discussions.[4] A special characteristic becomes apparent when accessing this platform, as each person has to declare him/herself as being female by using a female name – only by doing this is it possible to log in. This process was intended to rewrite and overwrite gender-specific effects and to stimulate reflection of experiences and constructions of space beyond categorizations based on physical gender irrespective of one's actual gender. The aim was to redefine and reoccupy (cyber)space. An artistic dialog centering on gender, space and power has indeed been triggered, even if this work as well seems to have trouble doing away completely with myths of establishment, as the ironic, yet self-consciously programmatic title demonstrates. Creating solidarities within the meaning of transversal politics are possible in this collaborative effort, situated practices are present.

B. Austrian artist *Margarete Jahrmann* takes this even further in her 1997 work *Superfeminisme*, as she strives to generate new entities and ideas.[5] This works is not as much about interfaces, as it is about tools to which the "datavatar TEXT/URE" open up additional possibilities to so-called superusers. This work's special feature is that the avatars, according to Jahrmann, "don't have to be necessarily constructed or fictional but can be hard-factbased."[6] Unambiguousness is contaminated within the symbolic order, as "'Superfem Avatars' are superfictional, and supergenderous, defining sex by transfer processes and transparence." Still, recipients, influenced by their own cultural socialization, tend to assign gender-specific attributes as closely as possible in accordance with the coding habits familiar to them. The superfictional is neither unambiguously gender-transgressive, nor is it gender-neutral.

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[4] See http://www.pars-patent.org.

[5] See http://www.konsum.net/fem.

[6] Margarete Jahrmann, Superfeminisme. Generated by Protocol-inherent datavators, in: Old Boys Network (Ed.), *First Cyberfeminist International. 20.-28.September 1997, Hybrid Workspace, Kassel,* edited by with contributions by Cornelia Sollfrank and Old Boys Network, and others, Hamburg 1998, 52-53, 52, see http://www.obn.org/obn_pro/downloads/reader1.pdf.

C. Another collaborative project carried out by female artists merits increased attention due to its particular approach to amalgamating artistic forms of expression, namely those from a real life project and netart.[7] The group *Old Boys Network*, founded in 1997 and made up of media artists and theorists has made it a goal to promote cyberfeminism and operates as a real life project engaging in a wide range of various activities at conferences and exhibitions, in publications and internet appearances. The brilliant name *Old Boys Network* (OBN) seeks to overwrite structures of male alliances by circulating feminist content addressing the issue of "women and the internet", an area burdened by prejudices, for the purposes of initiating structural change. The key issue is to link the old and continually renewed project "Life, Art and Politics" as closely and as meaningfully as possible. OBN members are required to take up a clear position on the complex issue of cyberfeminism and "to call [themselves] a woman (without consideration of the biological base of this intelligent life-form)".[8] Under the premise of this self-chosen, "intelligent life-form", cyberfeminist OBNs tackle new forms of technology and criticism of capitalism, of aesthetic strategies and their cultural impact. The current intro page on the OBN's permanent internet site shows, in addition to the OBN logo, three serially replicated persons, who can be identified as being of the male sex based on their physical appearance, habitus and dress code. However, their alleged individuality is rendered unrecognizable by the black bar covering their eyes and parts of their faces. The programmatic slogan "The mode is the message - the code is the collective!" appears beneath this image. All three aspects of perspectivation, performative, situated and transversal, are present in the OBNs work. Still, the motto is: further political concretization of the virulent cyberfeminism project is very welcome; strategic alliances are to be promoted further, not at all costs, but by carefully outlining their orientation towards feminist goals.

This outlines several possible consequences of a methodological nature and with respect to forms of institutionalization.

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[7] See http://www.obn.org.

[8] See http://www.obn.org and Ulrike Bergermann, Intelligente Lebensformen. Das ‚Old Boys Network' promotet den Cyberfeminismus, in: Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft 29 (June 2000), 21-37, 21.

3. Methods and forms of institutionalization

In addition to archiving efforts, which must be seen as the basic prerequisite for any kind of scholarly research , we must also continuously and simultaneously focus on a problem-oriented analytical perspective which has an interest in establishing findings that are relevant to the current situation. This must be stressed in particular in conjunction with media art which runs the very real risk of becoming (self)-enamored of complicated technological gadgetry.

A. Netart presents new challenges in connection with analytical processes. Representatives of disciplines, such as art history, have, however, paved the way considerably. In looking at performance art we have learned to deal with the scanty documentary materials that have been handed down to us and with the legends spun by the artists themselves by integrating all of this material in the analysis of the work and linking it inseparably with the analysis of reception history. The research work done with film and video in art history is also a testament to multi-facetted experiences with categories so central to time-based media, such as time, movement and a specific narration, or even anti-narration. Due to a lack of competence on the part of art history, sound has oftentimes been unjustly neglected.

We are faced with new challenges in netart and interactive art as a result of the frequent limitlessness of a particular work of art, making parts of it unpredictable even for experts. A primarily chosen, exemplary reception can serve as a suitable method for analyzing this kind of work. This must be done in a recognizable way and must form one of many possible foundations for discussing the work. A partial perspective should be taken, in other words one that Donna Haraway called for in the 1980s, namely a perspective that should be fundamental from a feminist theory point of view in order to replace academics' attempts at interpretation, many of which have asserted claims to universal language, paired with claims to authority.[9]

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[9] See Donna Haraway, Situated Knowledge: The Science of Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Priviledge of Partial Perspective, in: *Feminist Studies* 14, 1988 (3), 575-599.

B. As regards the possibilities of institutionalization, I would argue in favor of multi-tiered research perspectives and teaching practices. Transdisciplinary approaches should be further expanded in order to contextualize complex subject matters and questions in a detailed way and to create differentiations from an argumentative point of view. Traditional disciplines focusing on such subjects as literature, art, music, politics etc. continue to enjoy a high degree of legitimacy. These disciplines should be offered within the context of a historically, systematically and methodologically intensive education, and at large universities in particular. Moreover, the trend toward specializing university studies, and fields of research, is to be seen as very positive, as it opens up and expands the possibility of new findings. The establishment of feminist-oriented studies, for example feminist Afro-American studies, subaltern studies or white studies is proceeding apace – and not least due to a great deal of competition between universities, in particular for financial resources and students. These realities should be harnessed for engaging in substantive argument, regardless of the fact that oftentimes different labels are used for things that are in fact quite similar.

In (western) Europe, the pressure of the so-called Bologna Process of the European Education Campaign is radically transforming university structures and their academic programs. Highly specialized courses of study are being set up primarily on the Master's degree level, providing the students, as well as researchers, the opportunity to profile themselves. A further aim is to counteract the "management revolution" at universities[10] – currently sweeping across even Austria. This management revolution affects in many cases the redistribution of funding away from the arts and sciences towards administration, as well as frequently shifts the human resources of those working in the departments away from teaching and research and toward university self-administration.

Feminist studies must be further promoted by pursuing a strategy of integration. On one hand, separate courses of study and research field for feminist studies open up added

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[10] Charles Harrison, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 14, No. 53, March 2004: *Erziehung (Education),* Umfrage (Survey): No Guru No Method No Master. Zur Methode und Zukunft der Lehre, 126-145, 127.

benefits for analytical results; however, they risk becoming ghettosized. Feminist interventions in media art continue to be more than welcome, as are new alliances forged between feminist theory, feminist politics and a media art sciences discipline that at times focuses too strongly on media format. Several feminist media artists have produced promising work – as have several scholars as well.

Univ.Prof. Dr.phil.habil. Barbara Paul
University of Art Linz, Austria
Institute of Fine Arts and Cultural Studies
Chair Art history, Art theory, and Gender Studies
Hauptplatz 8
A – 4010 Linz, Austria
email: barbara.paul@ufg.ac.at