

SABOTAGING ‘THE BIG DADDY INTERNET MAINFRAME’: CYBERMEETING WITH SHU LEA CHEANG¹

Elena García-Oliveros Hedilla²

Universidad Complutense University, Madrid. PhD in process.

Abstract

Artists from the world of women have been forging their own paths since the 1970s, based on decisive commitments to the relationship between the arts and politics. The gender debate has been gradually taking shape within this new online space since the 1990s, which has encouraged some of these groups to create what has become known as “Cyberfeminism”. The utopian idea that the Internet could redefine the binary man-woman model based on queer tenets was soon abandoned but feminist net.art methodologies and works have continued to gain ground. This article explores these choices and analyses the breaks, both actual and possible, involved both on a social and artistic level. The case of artist Shu Lea Cheang, a collaborator in this research, is an example of an historical connection which began with the adoption of collaborative creative models, and ended with object art being replaced by digital art, driven by the internet context.

Keywords: CIBERFEMINISM; CIBERACTIVISM; COLLABORATIVE ART;
NEW GENDER OF PUBLIC ART; COMMUNITARIAN ART

García-Oliveros Hedilla, Elena. 2017 . "Sabotaging the ‘Big Daddy Internet Mainframe’: Cybermeeting with Shu Lea Cheang". *AusArt* 5 (1): XX-XX DOI: XX

INTRODUCTION

This article uses the first-hand experiences of notorious cyberfeminist⁴ artist, Shu Lea Cheang, to provide a historiographic overview of this political and invogue practice, and more specifically to look at how it is being developed from an artistic praxis, thus contributing to building on this trend. It also comes in the middle of a relevant debate: the relationship between politics and art, with the assertion that the latter can drive change in both the contextual and an individual's own information values, as well as alter reality. It furthermore raises fundamental questions about the way the art created by these practices is perceived, such as issues relating to authorship, demonstrated through more relational and dynamic feminist practices. Finally, it also sets forth a new paradigm of creation whose coordinates are far removed from those familiar to us.

BACKGROUND

Why do artists who inherited movements which broke with the conventional art system from the 70s onwards choose the Internet as the space for creating and sharing their work? What does the gender struggle have to do with this choice? What authority structure are these artists making reference to in cyberspace and what issues does this present for them?

These are some of the questions raised by the project 'From the feminist upheaval to public art: the Far West of opportunities' - <http://toxiclesbian.org/proyecto-de-investigacion/>-, which gives this article its context. They are formulated using a qualitative methodology, based on personal interviews carried out during public events with various artists who embody these changes, sharing their stories in the first person as privileged informers. During these structured events a university student firstly intervened, striking up a conversation with each artist. Then in the second instance specialist researchers like Remedios Zafra intervened, in this case analysing Shu Lea Cheang. The purpose of the research was thus to obtain the testimony of artists who have been subverting their praxis since the 70s, guided by political and militant interests, until they succeeded in breaking down a patriarchal reality⁵ which oppressed them from a creative and human perspective. This article will focus specifically on Shu Lea Cheang, a multimedia artist of Taiwanese origin, working in the net.art⁶ and cyberfeminism fields, whose work is structured around collaborative practices.

The intention is to ascertain which are the main trends inverting this model

online, which symbolically reflects what is happening in the art system. This is the idea which drives the work of some cyberfeminist artists like Shu Lea Cheang or Faith Wilding⁷ in relation to the presence of their art in the web environment. As we have seen, there has been an invitation since the end of the 90s and even the start of the 21st century to “sabotage” the patriarchal system which is also represented in cyberspace. As Cheang herself (2016) explains:

I think that the Internet has had its day. Let them publish adverts, cookies or urgent messages, let them monitor my purchasing power. The struggle against the patriarchy has returned to the streets.

I migrated to cyberspace in its earliest stages. Now, many of my works are based in the post-Internet crash era. Much of my work as an activist focuses on media and tools to reboot networks: free wifi, self-made electronics or those created in partnership with others, P2P links, open-source software and hardware...



Image 01: Cybermeeting between artist Shu Lea Cheang and students from the Facultad de Bellas Artes (School of Fine Arts) of the Complutense University of Madrid, the Performing Arts Masters of the University of Castilla La Mancha and from the Reina Sofía Museum. February, 2016. Intermediae, Matadero Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Madrid. [CC 3.0. Toxic Lesbian, 2016].

GROWING IN DISCONNECT WITH THE PATRIARCHY THROUGH THE INTERNET AND DIGITAL UNIVERSE

The 90s saw the creation of the Internet utopia as a possible space for a gender-based revolution. The idea that in this new “non-space” it was possible to grow in disconnect with the patriarchy led to a flourishing form of feminist activism specific to this context and, underpinned by this, an entirely new wave of artists looking to redefine gender, as explained by Ana Martínez-Collado (2011). This key idea of a cyberfeminist movement is subject to debate and is divisive. There are those who are most utopian, who believe that the use of these technologies could give rise to an alternative output which would open up a new panorama of individual and collective identity, and express their beliefs accordingly in their creations – one example of this is Australian group VNS Matrix⁸ as illustrated by their legendary piece “*Manifesto*”⁹ -<http://adanewmedia.org/files/2014/07/VNS.png>. And Shu Lea Cheang herself, who as they explained (2016), does not share this approach: “*I believe in the power of connection and collaboration offered by the Internet and I also believe that technology drives progress among people. However, I don't think that the Internet is capable of creating a utopia which can eliminate gender and race*”.

Cheang outlines for us the way their position differs to the line taken by VNS Matrix:

“The brave Cyberfeminist Manifesto directly faces off with the Big Daddy. It is a loud and clear statement. I work differently. I see my work Bowling Alley (1995) as an attack on the patriarchy (<https://jerichoattrition.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/on-the-origins-of-the-term-hacktivism/>). The collaborative online presence is being developed in three areas: a real bowling alley, presence in a gallery and a webpage. The action of knocking down pins in the bowling alley interferes with projections in the gallery and causes interference to the webpage. When the general public knocks down a pin, they provoke “upheaval” within an institution and “hack” the network subconsciously. The collaborative environment online lets the public intervene. It is a poetic gesture which allows the public to bring down the patriarchal system.

In a voluntary and subconscious way we log into the Big Daddy mainframe. We help to build this empire or patriarchy, feeding this insatiable hunger for privacy and intimacy with our data”.

(Cheang 2016)

Researcher Rosi Braidotti, who specialises in the in-depth study of cyberfeminist artists, the role of technology in relation with the new post-modern civilisation and the invitation to return to cultural movements considered a minority, such as cyberpunk –which would include Cheang- to compare these attitudes, agrees with the same, less-considered view of Internet possibilities regarding gender renewal. Braidotti notes¹⁰ in her article 'Cyberfeminism with a difference', the already-declared gender gap online, and thus the low expectations that may exist in this context:

“...while the computer technology seems to promise a world beyond gender differences, the gender gap grows wider. All the talk of a brand new telematic world masks the ever-increasing polarisation of resources and means, in which women are the main losers. There is strong indication therefore, that the shifting of conventional boundaries between the sexes and the proliferation of all kinds of differences through the new technologies will not be nearly as liberating as the cyber-artists and internet addicts would want us to believe.”

(Braidotti, 1998)

In spite of the clear gaps described by Cheang or Braidotti in the promised land of the Internet when it comes to redefining from a feminist perspective, artistic and activist works in this area are coming thick and fast with reformist resolve.

Remedios Zafra shows us how the Internet intrinsically offers the possibility of leaving your organism behind and thus breaks down the censorship that exists around deviating from the normal rules given that, because there are no physical references, there is a constant possibility of falsification. She points out that not only will codes and references change, but that the manipulation of reality will also involve a change in the value of contextual information and of the identity standpoint of each individual, and with it the mechanisms of collective production. These very mechanisms mentioned by Zafra are essential in many cyberfeminist community works. They will be harnessed by these online groups to implement these responses to this shared collective belief.

On a separate issue, and also as an influencing factor on the works of these authors, is the imbrication between the organism and technology, as commented on¹⁰ by Braidotti (1998):

“Far from appearing antithetical to the human organism and set of values, the technological factor must be seen as co-extensive with and inter-mingled with the human. This mutual imbrication makes it necessary to speak of technology as a material and symbolic apparatus, i.e. a semiotic and social agent among others”.

Symbolically the technological side would be seen as a core constituent of the person's identity, both in terms of the production of the signs necessary for communication and in social relationships.

Zafra makes reference as we can see to the way the Internet is harnessed, whilst Braidotti explains to us the reason for these groups' attraction to the digital and technological worlds. In both cases it is the relationship with the organism itself and with the other which comes into play. The dispute regarding possible gender redefinition and the way the self is perceived are what lead to this analysis.

It is clear that there can be no single attitude or cause driving these artistic practices to the Internet. The same is true of the rapidity of the exponential changes which have occurred during the past decades as regards technology and Internet use, which could be the basis of these apparently opposed positions. Instead it is the shared intention of this quest for the unknown horizon of the cyberfeminist journey which is of interest to this study. In any case we can see this same dissenting attitude towards a patriarchal, strict and straightjacketed universe, questioned in the work of these artists. What comes into play is the real possibility of breaking free of this oppression or on the contrary becoming complicit in it.

This dissent is something we have seen manifested in a different way by Shu Lea Cheang, who in 1994 moved their residency “to cyberspace” as stated in their own biography. They also describe their difficulty in existing in the current model and explain how their work relates to the digital world: *“The social conditions and political reality which shape my work are things I find unbearable at times and which drive me to project my work towards a present, past or future of science fiction”* (Cheang 2016).

Their works are clear examples of net.art, online digital and community art, illustrating an artistic model which seeks to redefine social structures, with a markedly critical attitude towards the kind of stiffness which removes opportunities not only for women, but also for any kind of minority, within

which Cheang identifies herself. The artist describes the difficulty this has caused them in their lifetime: "*Having to live with a triple label –racial minority, woman and queer- I have to work harder to cover more ground*".

The dissent of these artists cannot only be seen in the identity-based areas which we have explored. In terms of the art system itself, its mechanisms of recognition and for offering opportunities are also called into question, in the area of seeking new opportunities. Since the 70s, a time when thanks to victories in some areas of feminism female artists were able to speak and gain visibility, dissent was first manifested with the system whereby the same opportunities as offered to male artists were not open to them. As explained to us by veteran artist Suzanne Lacy in the interview she gave in 2012: "*How many women have been offered important exhibitions compared to men?, and How much money will they get to put on those exhibitions compared to men?*".

This context of invisibility and the very nature of what it means would push them to an alternative means of expression and dissemination to the existing model. They would furthermore break with the structure of art which they also viewed as aligned with the patriarchy.

In this context, Juan Vicente Aliaga sheds some light on what happened:

The different processes adopted in hegemonic practices obeyed formal motivations,..., they constituted the cornerstone of artistic language and the only modern art blessed by the New York altars, growing into a neo-imperialist version in European and Latin American sanctums... With these imposing parameters, in a world of mass-consumerism which was beginning to yield new gods and idols, art with gender components would need to find new outlets, fresh alternative spaces to commercial callousness.

(Aliaga 2007, 212)

SIMBOLICALLY BREAKING DOWN THE MAIN INTERNET MODEL AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GENDER DEBATE

As we can see, this “struggle against the patriarchy” which summarises the artistic and moreover, vital, attitude of these artists, constitutes a major challenge laid down by creators such as Cheang to break down what they would refer to as the Internet’s “Big daddy mainframe”. As we saw when they began their artistic journeys, when the internet was a hotbed of promises, many believed that the battle thus described could be fought in cyberspace, a possible site for innovation and also for liberation. This attitude however continued to evolve.

Some cyberfeminists see the use of technologies in itself as gender subversion in that they envisage a trickle-down of internet models from these new tools which do not conform with the traditional binary construction of genders based on strict genital anatomy. Cyberfeminism bases its discourse on the queer deconstruction of the masculine and the feminine, allowing a broad margin for the iconic creation and representation of other visual, sound and performance models, underpinned by innovative experiments with the digital, technological and online media which will make these possible.

This idea of sabotaging the prevailing context is key to Internet art, which has sprung up in response to the normal distribution channels of the art world amongst social groups of dissident artists. The reasons for conflict can range significantly: economic, political, social or even cultural aspects..., which is what gives rise to *net artists* and manifestations which vary hugely from one to the next, in spite of their shared views and the fact that they all work online.

The emergence of net.art is also linked to the anti-object criticism, which developed from the 60s under the influence of conceptual art or Marxist ideology itself. In this context, new strategies to share work with audiences are very often connected to innovation of the artistic process, to experimental aspects or to the opening up of new channels of expression. Internet artistic creation is linked both with a democratisation of art and with extending art to its audiences. These are also some of the motives which have driven artists over the past decades to use electronic tools, produce works in digital formats or to move towards cyberspace.

Let us therefore consider the journey from dissent and critical thinking which will prevent on the one hand the adoption of the prevailing formulae governing the art world, and on the other hand drive the attempt to escape the discriminatory treatment meted out to their contributions, due to being women, or because they do not fit the established mould. This shared idea of creating

an alternative model therefore led them to the Internet, where once again they would come up against the patriarchal blueprint which took little time to take root in what once was a promising libertarian environment. In this respect it is inevitable that the nomadic attitude of these groups would appear to be solidifying and establishing itself as the only valid strategy.

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Notas

Notes

- ¹ The project “From the Feminist Upheaval to Public Art and the Cyberspace: The Far West of Opportunities “ led by Elena García-Oliveros was publicly funded with money from the research support programmes at Intermediae Matadero Madrid, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo del Ayuntamiento de Madrid (*the Madrid City Council Contemporary Art Centre*), during the years 2014, 2015 and 2016.
- ² Elena García-Oliveros is a visual artist and teacher. In 2005 she created Toxic Lesbian (<http://www.toxiclesbian.org>) and took on the pseudonym of Elena Tóxica. She has developed projects in collaboration with artistic and cultural institutions such as Intermediae, El Ranchito and Medialab de Matadero, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (*Reina Sofía Museum*) in Madrid, Círculo de Bellas Artes (*Fine Arts Circle*), Tabacalera, Patio Maravillas and La Casa Encendida in Madrid, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (*Castilla y León Museum of Contemporary Art*), Arteleku de Donosti, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla (*Seville’s Contemporary Art Centre*), Medialab iMAL in Brussels and Medialab Public Art in Berlin, amongst others. Whilst carrying out her projects she has worked with organisations such as Amnesty International, CEAR, Women’s Link Worldwide and ILGA World, amongst other feminist organisations, organisations advocating LGBTQI rights and defending mental health. Furthermore, she has worked with individuals, activists and artists.
- ³ Use of ‘x’ or ‘e’ in endings in the Spanish language version of this text which indicate masculine or feminine gender represent a political choice to remove this reference. The article uses “x” in the Spanish language version, and “they/their” instead of “he/she/his/her” in the English language version to refer to those people who publicly defend this approach. These are also used in plurals where this may apply. The conventional gender assignment will however be retained in nouns or articles for those who do not use this approach in their work.
- ⁴ The term cyberfeminism is broad and culturally covers different manifestations. Initially defined as a movement under the influence of the third feminist wave, especially inspired by Donna Haraway with her “A Cyborg Manifesto” from 1987, it brought together artists such as pioneers VNS Matrix with the idea that the use of technologies involves subverting masculine identity and could support change to gender roles. Its fundamental political involvement takes place online and subsequently has led to various understandings of the phenomenon from a feminist perspective. Cheang does not identify with this cyberfeminist utopia but does see herself within what is known as Boix, de Miguel <http://www.mujiresenred.net/IMG/pdf/ciberfeminismo-demiguel-boix.pdf>- “cyberfeminist social artists”.
- ⁵ The patriarchy is taken to mean the dominance of the criterion of man vs subordinate woman, as much in private as in public, and where traditional values instilled by this practice throughout history prevail.
- ⁶ Net.art is a recent artistic manifestation which has grown from the new libertarian culture fostered by the Internet. It applies to works created by and for the Internet and which place emphasis, as explained by Galloway <http://aleph-arts.org/epm/forum/galloway1.html>, on its own autonomy and, based on this, new innovative approaches are being developed which contemplate other possible creative and social horizons.
- ⁷ Faith Wilding -<http://faithwilding.refugia.net/>- is an American artist of Paraguayan origin who worked with other female artists during the 70s to create new collaborative art practices based on feminism. Subsequently she would go on to develop her work within cyberfeminism, creating Subrosa <http://www.cyberfeminism.net/>- where her authorship is part of the collective and activist approaches.
- ⁸ The historic importance of VNS Matrix lies in their coining, jointly with Sadie Plant, the term cyberfeminism. It is made up of four female artists and activists who share a very similar approach in their activities and political discourse.

⁹ They would go on, in relation to this work, to publish a much more extensive text which compiles all of its main lines of thinking. In it they poetically and evocatively describe the feelings of freedom which are embodied by the act of “navigating a new world and identifying with a “cyborg” being, made up of code and bits. The name “mutant vixen” comes from the Internet, portrayed as a savage and disrespectful girl in the face of the main model, the “Big Daddy”. The manifesto explains specifically how to dematerialise identities immersed in this cloud, simultaneously rebuilding desire. Its much-repeated expression “Suck my code” from the 1996 written work, subsequent to the visual work, will live on in memory.