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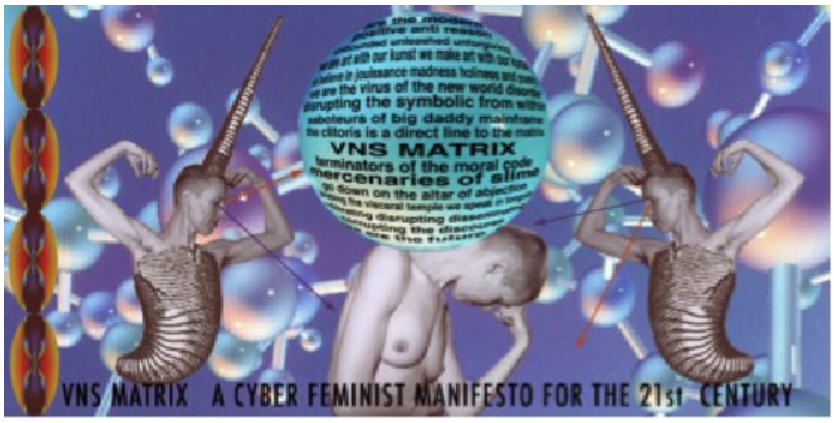
Monstrous Agents: Cyberfeminist Media and Activism

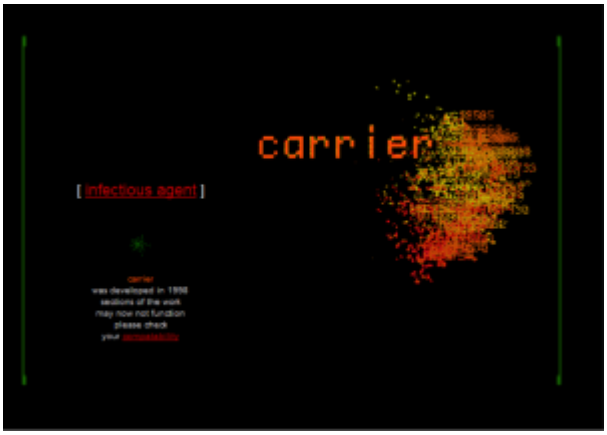
Tully Barnett



(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/Tully1.jpg)

Figure 1 VNS Matrix, "A Cyber Feminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (1991)

Australia produced a number of influential new media artworks by feminist artists in the 1990s. This activity stemmed from a longer history of video art undertaken in the 1980s and complemented the material turn in feminism led by Australians such as Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Hawthorne, Zoe Sofoulis, and Dale Spender. This was itself inspired by theoretical, if playful, works such as Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). In Australia, artworks by artists such as Linda Dement, Jill Scott, mez breeze, VNS Matrix, Melinda Rackham, and Francesca Da Rimini were created during a time of exuberance for the opportunities promised by online culture. This was characterised by ideas for changing society, its structures, and perhaps even the human itself in ways that would bolster prospects for women's equality, relationships to new technologies and the movements and practices they inspired. It was a moment of sharp interest in the intersection of new technologies with notions of gender, sexuality, the body and social equality. The term "cyberfeminism" surfaced in the early 1990s and became a term associated with this trend. The artworks produced in this period tend to reflect, amongst other things, an optimism about a transition to a networked world that might hold promises for overcoming boundaries and binaries, providing a means for advancing a feminist agenda into the new millennium, as well as a vehicle for communicating critique of the gendered habitus around technology in mainstream culture. The artworks also tend to highlight the body as a key site for negotiating new media theories, practices and behaviours. However, the term cyberfeminism dissipated somewhat after the turn of the millennium, despite a continued interest in gender-based critiques of technoculture.[1]



(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Carrier.png)

*Figure 2, Melinda Rackham's _Carrier_*

This paper considers two important artworks of the 1990s as markers of the cyberfeminist moment. **"A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century"** (http://www.transmediale.de/content/cyberfeminist-manifesto-21st-century) (1991) by VNS Matrix and ***carrier*** **(1996)** (http://www.subtle.net/carrier) by Melinda Rackham are key examples of early artworks that contributed productively to the discourse around women and new technologies. In these works, viruses and techno-tools are mobilized as game-changing forces that cross boundaries and binaries. "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" proclaim VNS Matrix, establishing their work's subversive agenda, and identifying in technoculture an opportunity and a set of tools to recode social norms. Meanwhile, *carrier* is a web-based multimedia installation using biopolitical themes to undermine conventional ideas about the body, infection, borders and boundaries, and agency. It announces infection as an opportunity for symbiosis and posits both gender itself and social change as viral entities that move across boundaries in biotextual ways. Revisiting these texts fifteen to twenty years after their creation illuminates a trajectory of cyberfeminist thought around the affordances of technology for gender work but also the affordances of language for gender play and, ultimately, social change. The monstrous agents unleashed by *carrier* and VNS Matrix served as flag bearers to an assemblage of writers, artists and scholars concerned with gender in digital and technocultural spaces.

Considering the historical place of these texts only fifteen to twenty years after their creation raises issues about how to appropriately contextualise these important works. In the scheme of art history, this is a blink of an eye. But in terms of the maturation of the digital format and the obsolescence of its technical substrata, this is a much longer period of time.[2] Therefore, developing a way of thinking both historically and immediately about the works is crucial, especially because of the rapidly changing

theoretical frameworks that arose to complement quickly changing technologies and the everyday practices that changed with them. Changing styles in web design and graphics capabilities mean that some early works of internet art bear the hallmarks of early web design and thus appear less contemporary than they would otherwise do; for many others, however, this is not the case. The time-sensitive nature of the discussion is evident in Sarah Kember's 2002 article "Reinventing cyberfeminism: cyberfeminism and the new biology." Published just 11 years after VNS Matrix first used the term "cyberfeminist" in their manifesto, five years after the First Cyberfeminist International was hosted in Germany in September 1997, five years after Sadie Plant's book *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture*, and three years after Susan Hawthorne and Renata Klein's *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity* (1999), Kember discusses the idea of reinventing the notion of cyberfeminism in a manner more consistent with reinventing a praxis decades or centuries in the past. And of course cyberfeminism was never one single thing but was a term applied to a variety of expressions, views, practices and understandings, containing contradictions, tensions and diverse manifestations. For example, Faith Wilding asked "Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?" in 1998. Wilding identifies utopian traits in the works of Sadie Plant and VNS Matrix, and sees in Braidotti's understanding of cyberfeminism a plea for joyous uptake, but argues that much articulation of cyberfeminism contains within it "a profound ambivalence in many wired women's relationship to what they perceive to be a monumental past feminist history, theory and practice" (p.7). That cyberfeminism as a concept can be accused of forgetting feminism is curious.

Usage of the term cyberfeminism faded away to some degree after the millennium, although many of the practices of art, activism, high theory, electronic literature, and so on that made up cyberfeminsim continued in other ways. Cyberfeminism may be a term with declining relevance in the first decade of the millennium, as a result of many factors including, I contend, the dot.com bubble bursts that bruised the utopian or optimistic bent of much of digital culture. However, the monstrous promises of cyberfeminists, including the dangerous act of *carrier's* viral infectious agent *sHe* and the clitorially-jacked VNS team, continue to populate technoculture. These texts continue to circulate along with their use of subversive and progressive possibilities of language and the opportunities for forging meaningful understandings through the appropriation and combination of digital signifiers.

Australia in the 1990s was primed to be a hotbed of cyberfeminist art expression. The Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) traces its history to a 1984 event

sponsored by the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, South Australia. Since then, ANAT has supported the development, creation, curation and communication of artworks that intersect with technology in some way. The Australia Council also convened a Hybrid Arts Board which became New Media Arts Fund until 2004 when it was disbanded. National support engendered an environment where Australia was alive with ideas about what the new information technology revolution was going to bring to art and culture. Magazines like *21C* expounded the opportunities of the changing landscape. Australian critical theorists and feminist scholars were active nationally and internationally. Dale Spender published *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace* in 1994. Spender writes:

> *There are literally thousands of women's groups now on-line: everything from a women's Web Site and Women's Resources on the Internet, through to Jane Austen, Women's Health Hotline, The Ada Project (a collection of resources for women in computing) and a Women Artists' Archive. Everything you could dream of wanting. And more "exchange" than books could ever provide, which is why it is so exciting and gratifying (Spender 1994, p. 237).*

Spender focused on the opportunities for access and networking growing on the Internet. In 1999, Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, Australian scholars and writers, published their edited collection *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity,* bringing together a range of international perspectives on digital issues and taking an approach that was more critical of the opportunities new technologies might provide for redressing gender imbalance. Works by VNS Matrix and Melinda Rackham, amongst others, were created by young Australian women for whom the internet served as a means of collapsing the "tyranny of distance" between the former colony and the rest of the world, to make it easier to operate on the world stage of art and feminist praxis. For the Australian context, this collapsing of distance brought with it a concomitant degree of optimism for the prospects of networking, collaboration and communication, inflecting the cyberfeminist hope for the breakdown of gender inequality through new technologies. This is not to suggest that cyberfeminism is unequivocally euphoric, optimistic, enthusiastic or naïve about chances for gender equality afforded under the technocultural regime but that the hope, excitement and the pressing of opportunity is evident in many of the works that might be labelled cyberfeminist.

This is the environment into which first VNS Matrix in 1991 and then Melinda Rackham in 1999 produced their works. After 2000, though, the culture changed somewhat. In *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, editors Gajjala and Oh ask "Where have all the cyberfeminists

gone?" (2012, p.1). Their collection is, of course, an attempt to answer that question and is predicated on the idea of locating the power and monstrosity of the cyberfeminist movement in the contemporary moment. Their answer is diverse. They find cyberfeminists in women's blogging networks and their conferences, in women's gaming, in fandom, in social media, in online mothers' groups performing pro-breastfeeding activism, and in online spaces developed and populated by marginal networks of women in non-Western countries.

Yet, what precisely constitutes contemporary cyberfeminist remains elusive and amorphous. When interviewed about their book, Gajjala and Oh described the very different vantage points from which they perceived cyberfeminism and constructed that difference as generational. For Gajjala:

> *I felt there was a huge gap in terms of how cyberfeminism was being talked about right from when I first started my career … cyberfeminism celebrates particular kinds of women-centred activities but doesn't acknowledge some of the problems … They all graze the issues but the actual concrete understanding of how these are problematic doesn't come through all the time (Reynolds 2013).*

Gajjala says she became aware that contemporary deployments of feminism in digital environments were "replaying the same problematics" as the previous era's. Gajjala's younger colleague and co-editor, Oh, a postgraduate student, had another point of view:

> *I had a little bit of a different perspective when I started to do this project … When she [Gajjala] talked about cyberfeminism, I wasn't really sure about what cyberfeminism was … because I hadn't really used the word cyberfeminism before and because I am a different generation to her … Even though I don't say I am a cyberfeminist I constantly research about all the things, people's empowerment, women's empowerment towards cyberspaces (Reynolds 2013).*

Oh, then, indicates that she does not identify with or use the term "cyberfeminism" even though her research revolves around issues of women's empowerment in online spaces. For her, the term has dissipated to the point of irrelevance, despite a continuation of the relevance of the work of cyberfeminism to her. Later in the interview she says "In a few years we will not need to use the term cyberfeminism at all" (Reynolds 2013). Is cyberfeminism, then, a tool or a descriptor? Will we still need feminism but not cyberfeminism? Can we want cyberfeminsim without needing it and what is the difference?

Rather than defining cyberfeminism, Gajjala wants to move beyond the definitional phase. She says “It was no longer a question of having a definition of what cyberfeminism is.” Rather, she says, she wanted to “put the whole question of cyberfeminism in doubt”; Oh points out that “by not defining cyberfeminism we showed, even though we did not intend it, how people define cyberfeminism itself in different ways.” For Oh there is a sense of unease with the term cyberfeminism. For Gajjala, meanwhile, there is a frustration about the “amnesia about the early days” of the Internet and cyberfeminism.

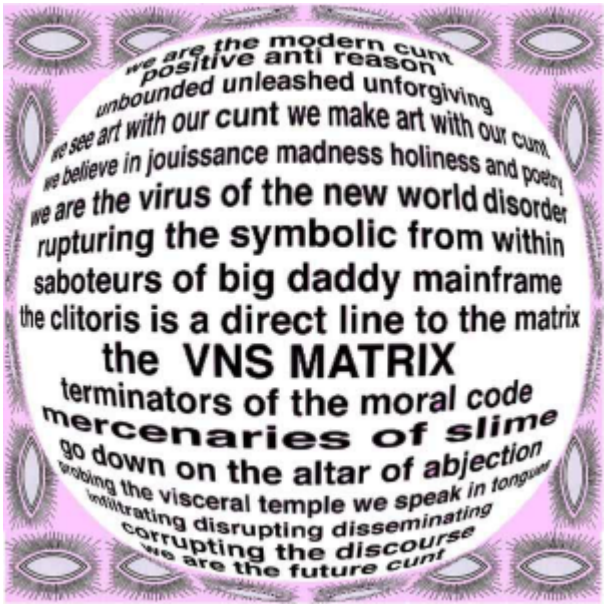
From this productive and illuminating dialogue between the two editors, each from a different generation, there is a sense that perhaps the term cyberfeminism has become conflated with its earliest incarnation during the utopian moment of the early to mid-1990s – where new technologies were inflected with an optimism about information and communications technologies as instruments for overcoming disadvantage – and is no longer a term of particular relevance to young women researchers, activists and artists in online spaces because this utopia never came to pass. For those active in the first articulations of cyberfeminism, there may now be frustration that certain groups of women remained marginal or oblivious to the vision and agency of cyberfeminism, while for younger groups of women there is a sense that cyberfeminism is passé, with many sitting somewhere in between. Looking back at the early cyberfeminist net art assists in resolving the tension between the “amnesia” concerning the achievements of the early era of cyberfeminism and a residual interest in its issues without ownership of its movement. Like the term “cyberfeminist,” these works continue to prompt as many questions as they answer, demonstrating that the clitoris’s direct line to the matrix is as robust, if complex as ever. I suggest that much of the power of cyberfeminism has found its way into schools of thought such as media archaeology and media history that have a strong emphasis on new materialism. However, while this goes some way towards answering Gajjala and Oh’s question of “where have all the cyberfeminists gone?” perhaps a more pertinent question might be where have all the monstrous women gone? VNS Matrix’s “A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century” and Melinda Rackham’s *carrier* serve as useful texts to exemplify the use of monstrosity and viral symbology in early Australian cyberfeminism-inspired, activism-oriented and social conscious internet art.

VNS Matrix

Long before the rush of cyberfeminist scholarship of the mid-to-late 1990s, VNS Matrix was creating and distributing, both on and offline, a manifesto for women entering the

new age of connectivity. They were also making digital artworks that were exhibited at a range of international new media / digital arts venues and festivals globally including the International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) 1994. The group is credited throughout the scholarship of cyberfeminism and women's digital art for their role in advancing the field in the early 1990s. According to the Medienkunstnetz website,

> *In the sense of having an aggressive confrontation with the constructions of identity and gender in cyberspace, VNS Matrix tried to redefine the role and image of women in art and technology. One of the group's principal strategies was to unmask and debilitate androcentric, mythical images and to hold up against them the newly-created representations of a stronger and active femininity (Medienkunstnetz, n.d.).*



(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/VNS.png)

Figure 3, "A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" by VNS Matrix

VNS Matrix (pronounced Venus Matrix) was formed in 1991 by four artists – Francesca da Rimini, Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, and Virginia Barratt – in Adelaide, South Australia. VNS Matrix's "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (1991) is one of the first recorded usages of the term "cyberfeminist" and the group is frequently credited with creating the term (Rosser 2005; Hawthorne 1999, p. 2). "Our manifesto reproduced itself virally, and has been translated into Japanese, Italian, French, Spanish, German, Russian and Finnish" writes Francesca da Rimini on the website she maintains to discuss the work of the collective (VNS Matrix, n.d.).

VNS Matrix worked in a variety of different artistic media with an emphasis on themes inspired by and founded on feminism, cultural theories, postmodernism and technoculture. Their work engages directly with women's use of technological tools, sexuality in virtual environments, and identity formulation. The works of VNS Matrix challenge patriarchal notions of women's engagement with technology and offer a space for "… women who hijack the tools of domination and control and introduce a rupture into highly systematised culture by infecting the machines with radical thought, diverting them from their inherent purpose of linear topdown mastery" (VNS Matrix, n.d.). The use of viral symbology presents a means of emphasising the biological alongside the technological, a disruptive organism that can slip through the defenses of the "big daddy mainframe." To do so acknowledges the conservative masculinist nature of much of the technology that constitutes technoculture. The emphasis on hijack, rupture, nonlinearity, rhizomatic structures, and disruption imbues the debate about technoculture with hope for access and transformation.

"A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" is an artwork consisting of image and text that includes a short statement designed to be both printed and distributed in material poster format and to be distributed digitally.[3] Inspired, like most others active in cyberfeminist praxis, by Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and by new works of art integrating screens of various kinds, VNS Matrix used bold language to mark cyberspace as a space of agency for women. The 17-line manifesto contains the famous phrase "we are the virus of the new world disorder / rupturing the symbolic from within / saboteurs of the big daddy mainframe / the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix." Positing the merging of not only the female body but the most sensitive female genitalia to new technologies, which were so frequently seen as objects of masculine ownership, destabilised the discourse.

At the centre of their billboard-shaped rectangle is a sphere containing the text of the manifesto, the 17 lines that begin and end with "cunt" (the work opens with the line "We are the modern cunt" and concludes with the line "We are the future cunt")[4], emphasising the extent to which the embodiment of female sexuality is at the core of considerations of women and cyberspace. The textual sphere rests on the crooked neck of a naked female seen from the waist up, fist pressed to her downward facing forehead, taking up a stance reminiscent of both images of the mythical Atlas and Rodin's *The Thinker*. On both sides of this figure there floats a woman, the same woman, whose torso tapers off into a shape reminiscent of a shell, a bug and a machine. Molecular structures float in space behind the figures.

The Manifesto was printed and posted in physical spaces around their hometown of Adelaide. It was printed as a billboard and displayed for a short time locally in that format. The 17 lines of the text are:

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 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

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

The playful and strategic use of language and terminology within these 17 lines serves VNS Matrix's agenda of "rupturing the symbolic." Of particular note is their construction of their personae as "saboteurs of big daddy mainframe." Gendering the

mainframe in this way and investing it with patriarchal connotations indicates that hardware, and in particular the big hardware of the early computer era, is associated with the military-industrial complex, the conservative capitalist agenda of IBM and so on. By disrupting the "big daddy mainframe," VNS Matrix posits the tools of new media art in opposition to mainframe technology while also establishing the tools of the patriarchal tech culture as open and accessible for all, especially women, and for a multiplicity of purposes. Like Sadie Plant then, the VNS Matrix vision is one where technology is or becomes associated with the feminine rather than the masculine, subverting traditional associations and binaries. Moreover, in contending that "the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix," VNS Matrix rally artists to take control of the metaphors used to describe human-technology interactions in ways that emphasise the power of female sexuality, transcending the usual phallic boys and toys descriptors. VNS Matrix use motifs of freedom and liberation, as seen in lines like "Unbound unleashed unforgiving," tapping into previous feminist agendas such as suffrage and the struggle for equal employment conditions and contrasting previous suffering and constraint with the newfound freedom of representation and expression offered by new technologies of information and communication. In referring to "terminators of the moral code," VNS Matrix denote both Haraway's cyborg and the militaristic and apocalyptic cyborgs of phallocentric action movies of the era. But these cyborgs are put to new use, rupturing the status quo by becoming "terminators of the moral code." By promising to "go down on the altar of abjection," VNS Matrix are invoking both the sacred and the profane as well as Kristeva's theoretical work about abjection. The sacred and the sexual are resurrected in the next lines "probing the visceral temple we speak in tongues / infiltrating disrupting disseminating"

A key trope of this work is the virus. "We are the virus of the new world disorder," write VNS Matrix. Computer viruses date back to the early 1980s and began to gain concern and notoriety in the 1990s. Jussi Parikka notes that in the 1990s discourses about computer viruses caused hysteria, and he identifies in this hysteria the presence of another kind of hysteria, to that "key sexed disease of the previous *fin de siècle*. Viruses became a sign of the *fin de millennium*" (2007, p. 2). In this way, Parikka indicates a pathology of the computer virus, perhaps even a teratology, slipping between the technological and the biological, importing the fear of new biological viruses such as AIDS and Ebola into technoculture. VNS Matrix rejects much of this hysteria and reworks the metaphor of the virus to see it as an agent of change, corruption, destabilization of the conservative and the patriarchal, and ultimately, as an opportunity. Here "corrupting the discourse" is achieved by both theme and

technology. Parikka notes that the "virus is also an expression of the media ecology" that is intimately connected with the biological, drawing together the notions of biology and technology at a time when the internet promised to help people leave their bodies behind (2007, p. 3). Melinda Rackham picks up this conception of virus in *carrier*.

Melinda Rackham's <em<carrier

Marking the end of the decade that opened with "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century," ***carrier*** (http://www.subtle.net/carrier) (1999) is a biopolitical web-based multimedia installation created during a moment of cyberfeminist activity and net art enthusiasm. It won numerous awards and was exhibited in virtual and physical galleries and festivals around the world. It sets out to destabilise the user's traditional or conventional notions of the body and instead invites its audience to rethink the boundaries between humans and their bodies, between bodies and the foreign agents that inhabit them, and between humans and their technologies. It posits the relationship between humans and viruses as symbiotic and exciting, and dramatizes that relationship. It offers a questioning of the boundaries between flesh, virus and machine by creating an interactive textual experience inviting dialogue between the reader/viewer and a seductive "infectious agent" known as *sHe*, an explicit denial of the gender binary in characterizing the biotextual being. Fred Botting uses the term biotextual to refer to monsters in general as he considers the relationship between metaphor and monster in relation to *Frankenstein*. Botting writes that the monster, as a concept, "marks a crossing where the real and the world of symbols confound each other" (2003, p. 345) and draws on Derrida's thinking about hybridization. Although Botting acknowledges that the metaphor of science contained in *Frankenstein* has a particular resonance with "technologies of life" (2003, p.341; citing Jon Turney, 1998, p. 219), and that it has reared its head in the nuclear debate in that atomic science is seen as able to "unnaturally [usurp] female reproductive power [and] [give] birth to a destructive energy capable of effacing humanity and nature" (p.341), for Botting the gender dimension of monstrosity remains largely unexplored. For Rosi Braidotti, it is much clearer.

carrier uses shockwave vrml and java programming beneath a haunting visual and auditory landscape to combine hypertextual links with the insistent and infectious agent *sHe*who guides the audience through the work and engages with the audience, hailing them.[5] The work is an immersive experience that invites the user to enter into its multimodal narratives, using unsettling otherworldly sounds, black backgrounds and floating viral imagery. Rackham uses her net art to provide information about

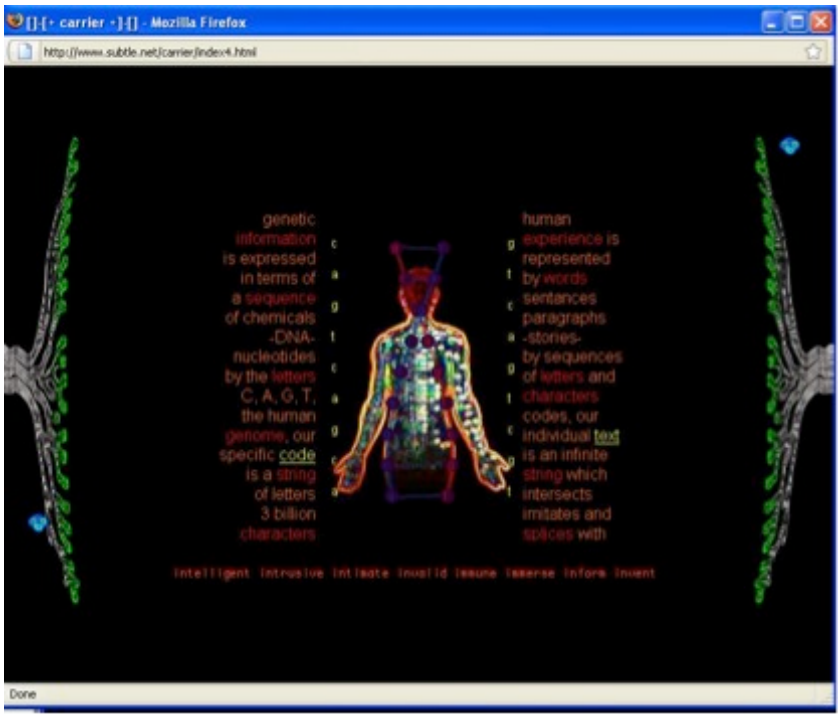
Hepatitis C (HCV) and to work against the social stigma of the disease by questioning misunderstandings about viral infection. *carrier* also communicates the stories and experiences of people suffering from the health complications of the virus, from death and devastation to an array of positive outcomes and emotional growth. The work breaks down the binary of the infected and the uninfected by enticing the user into an infected state through the process of the narrative. Most significant in the immersion in the work is the way Rackham incriminates the audience in the process of infection (Barnett 2012). The audience becomes a carrier of a viral agent and must experience, if only virtually, the emotional consequences of becoming infected. The user is invited to enter a name into the work and is thereafter addressed by that name in a chilling dissolution of the lines between reader and text, between virus and the human body that hosts it. As the user progresses further into the text, the interaction becomes more intimate. The user is asked, "melt with me?" By clicking yes, the user permits the virus entry. By clicking no, the user is infected against his or her will, being told, "the boundaries of separate identity / collapsed long ago / come with me now." If the audience continues to refuse entry, the agent addresses the audience by whatever name they entered previously:

> *Tully, you are carrier 12645*
>
> *Your most intimate sequences*
>
> *Are subordinated to my needs*
>
> *You are forever bound*
>
> *In tactical alliance*
>
> *With the contagious others*
>
> *Nameless*
>
> *Faceless*
>
> *Genotypes*

The infectious agent, the protagonist of the piece, presents contagion as equivalent to evolution. In *carrier,* the infecting virus is literally the Hepatitis C virus, but it also represents metaphorical and technological forms of infection, seductive and infectious

ideas, and new paradigms. The virus is both a biological virus causing illness and suffering amongst millions of people globally and a computer virus, reminding the user of the connections between the body and the technological even as it collapses them.

Like "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century", *carrier* reminds us of the changing role and symbology of viruses in the new technoculture. What the atomic "bomb represented for the previous wave of SF, the Virus has come to represent for the contemporary period: the promise of both total destruction and total change, grounds for a kind of apocalyptic fantasy (or "post-holocaust" fiction)" (Cohn 2001, online). Jesse Cohn writes that "in a world run on microchips, viruses naturally stand for the new order of things: capillary power, made invisible" (2001, online). The subversive nature of the virus makes it an attractive metaphor. Rackham's work belongs firmly in this genealogy and she uses biological and viral metaphors to interrogate society's relationship to information, machines, viruses and bodies and to critique traditional binaries of male/female, human/nonhuman/inhuman, sick/well, and self/Other. At the same time, Rackham is performing a textual infection and symbiosis with her multimodal net art, in that the cyber can be seen as itself a virus entering and replicating within literature as Rackham plays with notions of storytelling in a changing world. This is reflected in the language of textuality Rackham employs to discuss DNA and the processes of infection – for example, Rackham juxtaposes DNA with language by pitting against each other two statements: "genetic information is expressed in terms of a sequence of chemicals -DNA – nucleotides by the letters C, G, A, T – the human genome, our specific code is a string of letters 3 billion characters long." Comparing DNA to language, Rackham writes: "human experience is represented by words, sentences, paragraphs – stories – by sequences of letters and characters codes, our individual text is an infinite string which intersects, imitates and splices with others." If, as Baudrillard argues, viruses "contain within them the whole logic of our system" (2003, p. 67), how do we conceptualize the gender dimension of viral infection as performed in Melinda Rackham's *carrier*?



(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/Tully2.jpg)

Figure 4 Melinda Rackham's carrier

Wan-shuan Lin (2009), in her analysis of the "cultural responses to infectious disease," discovers a progression from the quarantine/sanitation model that sought to separate clean from dirty towards a contagion/vaccination model of understanding disease that used military metaphors of invasion. She identifies a new, alternative view of the body "as conglomerate consisting of diverse elements" (2009, p. 185). This is Rackham's symbiosis model. Lin concludes that "Instead of being victimized by viruses, the human body, by developing certain cellular mechanisms to exert effects on the virus, thereby triggers corporeal becomings, in a sense actively engages in the process of making connections with the most hetereogeneous elements" (p. 192). The duality of the co-opted meaning of the term virus represents another conflation between the mechanical/digital and the biological.

Rackham's labelling of her viral agent as *sHe* indicates another form of symbiosis, one that emphasises both male and female, giving the male pronoun a capital but encapsulating it within the female pronoun. The H is an eruption in the female. It also bears the marker of chemical symbol returning hard science to the negotiations at work in this piece. This evolution of gender is consistent with *carrier*'s motif of contagion as a transformative evolutionary force and the idea of the virus as a force that destroys boundaries and binaries, including gender binaries. Here, gender itself is sticky, transgressive, elusive, and able to cross barriers and acting as an Infectious Agent itself. In an interview with Eugene Thacker, Rackham observes:

> *Viruses are cross-dressers — they mimic others protoplasmic signatures to slip into places where the immune system would rather they not go — with the resulting viral cross-species merging being sex in its rawest form — the virus inserts its genetic material inside our cells, using our proteins to make an offspring, an almost perfect copy of itself.This is an incredibly smart way to reproduce, to use a host/ess body whose gender is irrelevant. Viruses already know how to speak the language of the body, how to utilise it for their own purposes, while bio-medical science still struggles with its limited genetic alphabet of C A G T (Thacker, 2001).*

As Rackham plays with notions of storytelling, so too does *sHe*, both gendered and androgynous, by dismantling stable gender binaries and holding a mirror up to the possibilities of gender transformation in the cyber world. As white blood cells catch and encapsulate foreign matter before expelling it from the human body, as viral cells capture and encapsulate healthy cells in the body before replacing them, so too does gender here operate as a viral and encapsulating agent.

These two works present bodies that have become monstrous in some fashion. The Infectious Agent of *carrier* and VNS Matrix's "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" both use the motif of slime in their invasion narratives. "Her gentle slime envelops you / penetrating your essence," *sHe* tells you. The Manifesto, meanwhile, represents VNS Matrix as "mercenaries of slime." Zoe Sofoulis identifies VNS Matrix's use of slime as "the phenomena of exchange, friction, lubrication, of traffic at the borders of categories, entities, and meaning systems" (1994, p. 102). In *carrier* the gendered and mostly female viral agent *sHe* is seductive and erotic and deadly, consciously inviting the user to "melt with me," to evolve through infection, through a transformation into a symbiotic being no longer human in quite the same way. In "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century," VNS Matrix articulate a game-changing approach to art and cyberculture that sees women developing new modes of subjectivity associated with female genitalia and identifying with violent actions such as rupture and sabotage. In this way, these texts reflect the feminist theory that underpins early cyberfeminism. Donna Haraway talks about the promises of monsters in reconfiguring the other as a positive agent (1992), while Rosi Braidotti writes that "monsters lend themselves to a layering of discourses" (1996, p. 135). Alongside these theorists, Rackham and VNS Matrix posit monstrosity, viral transformation and otherness as agents of change, of positive transformation. According to Haraway, networked cultures of technology provide an "inescapable possibility for changing maps of the world, for building new collectives out of what is not quite a plethora of human and unhuman actors" (1992, p. 355).

These works are important not only in and of themselves but also as markers for the tidal shifts in thinking about women and technological spaces. As iconic texts of the cyberfeminist moment of the 1990s, these two works help establish not only the context of that decade – one that sought desperately not to be defined – but also go some way towards recovering an understanding of that genre and that term. Now as the use of the prefix 'cyber' has declined in humanities disciplines in favour of 'digital,' we see a complementary return to the word "cyberfeminism," as evinced in Radhika Gajjala's and Yeon Ju Oh's 2012 edited collection titled *Cyberfeminism 2.0* – although Oh's view, as mentioned above, is that one day we may no longer need the term cyberfeminism, indicating a strong ambivalence with the term and its construction as a tool rather than a culture. The book, however, pointedly uses the term in its title over others like "internet scholar" – as they discuss in an interview (2013, online). The usage is a way of holding onto the agency and saliency of the term and positioning their work within a particular context.

The domestication of the Internet into a censored, commercialised, commodified tool, made mainstream in the lead up to the new millennium, has had an impact on the reception of internet art. The phallocentric hierarchies of old tech have replicated themselves in era 2.0, as demonstrated by the origin stories of the new platforms of Web 2.0 and its social media moment. The male founders of Google, Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and so on continue to dominate the space. In addition, the pragmatics of creating net art remain problematic for women. Suyin Looui and Mary Flanagan in 2007, too, considered the fate of cyberfeminism in "Rethinking the F Word: A Review of Activist Art on the Internet." They argue that "cyberfeminism as a liberatory ideal has not yet achieved its potential, in part because of larger societal pressures surrounding the information technology fields" (p. 181). In acknowledging the lack of women in computer science, they look to art to find women engaging with technology. Even there, according to Flanagan and Looui, it is difficult to locate "women artists who are producing theoretically challenging and technologically 'cutting-edge' websites that are also explicitly feminist" (p. 182).

Yet works like Melinda Rackham's *carrier* and VNS Matrix's "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" remain exemplary and provide viable examples to follow. They testify that the possibilities of cyberfeminism lie not just in technological experiments but with language itself and the strategic harnessing of language to subvert, transgress, play with and dismantle signifiers. This semiotic spitfire of language and technology,

subjectivity and gender, evident in "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" and *carrier*, helped disrupt our view of gender in the cyberage and on the cyberstage.

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This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review** (http://adareview.fembotcollective.org) .

Footnotes (returns to text)

1. While the term cyberfeminism dissipated somewhat in the first decade of the new millennium, a thread of continued usage can be drawn throughout the decade from Sarah Kember’s *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life* (2003) to the more contemplative approaches at the end of the decade in Looui and Flanagan’s “Rethinking the F word: A review of activist art on the Internet” (2007) and Jessie Daniels’ “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, gender, and embodiment” (2009). Recently initiatives such as Fembot and FemTechNet have sought to provide a locus for a renewal of concentrated interested around gender and technology, picking up on the continued interest of scholars such as

Anne Balsamo and Teresa de Lauretis, among others. Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh's 2012 collection *Cyberfeminism 2.0* provides a platform for exploring the multivalent ways that the agency of cyberfeminism continues beyond the ascendency of the term.

2. Preservation concerns are rising in response to this. Archive.org and Australia's Pandora service do important work in capturing the key new media texts that are available on the world wide web. However, the functionalities of these preservation spaces require more work to ensure that not only the text is preserved but also the playability of the interfaces. A resource for web.art preservation similar to Melanie Swalwell's Play it Again project preserving Australia's software heritage is crucial to capture the unique nature of born-digital artworks.
3. VNS Matrix, "A CyberFeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" This version is housed on the website of Transmediale. Online. Available: http://www.transmediale.de/content/cyberfeminist-manifesto-21st-century Accessed 14 September 2013. I note that VNS Matrix sometimes represent the term as two words, for example on the image of the manifesto analysed here, but elsewhere use one word. In cultural criticism, cyberfeminism is always presented as one word.
4. Kay Shaffer reports that the public billboard version of the manifesto had to use 'kunst' instead of cunt to satisfy censors.
5. Durability issues haunt Rackham's *carrier* as well. The piece uses Shockwave and Java and requires updating to ensure compatibility with current browsers and plug ins.

PEER REVIEWED

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Popular Culture: Commentary and Critique in Community," (co-authored with Ben Kooyman) *Networking Knowledge* (2012) and "Remediating the Infected Body: Writing the Viral Self in Melinda Rackham's carrier", *Biography Special Issue: (Post)Human Lives* (2012).

3 THOUGHTS ON "MONSTROUS AGENTS: CYBERFEMINIST MEDIA AND ACTIVISM"

Rosie Cross

OCTOBER 28, 2014 AT 3:49 AM

Hi Tully

Not sure all your references and claims are correct about when Dr. Sadie Plant used & cited the term cyberfeminist, she did coin it. She was perhaps more seminal in the cyberfem movement than perhaps Haraway; and I have had the privilege of interviewing them both. Also, it may be worth mentioning my little zine that's been around since the early 90s, is the World's first Cyberfeminist hyperzine. (www.geekgirl.com.au)

Also to note I don't want this to be misconstrued and taking attention away from VNS Matrix, they rocked as a group and still do as individuals. Their contribution to art, & theory still reverberates. It is thoroughly appreciated and acknowledged, and yes they totally left a trail of monstrously good digital footprints that have yet to be filled!

Regards, geekgirl

Pingback: **Talking Cyberfeminism and Art with Artist and Aspiring Cyborg, Signe Pierce – SLUTEVER**

Pingback: **Syllabus "The Humanist in the Computer: Digital Humanities and Social Justice" COLT 18.02 (Winter 17) – Dr. Kirstyn Leuner, Postdoctoral Fellow (Dartmouth College)**

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