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6

Cyberfeminist Literary Space: Performing the Electronic Manifesto

Carolyn Guertin

According to media critic Justine Cassell, the most effective “feminist vision” of an electronic text or software design “as a space” for sharing authority with others is to have the work “be about [its own] design and construction” (1998: 302). Cyberfeminism and cyberfeminist electronic literature are relentlessly meta, demonstrating a prevailing preoccupation with their own construction. It should come as no surprise then that the dominant genre for cyberfeminists is the manifesto, including programs for Cyborgs (Haraway 1985), mercenaries of slime (VNS Matrix 1991), for Net.Wurkers (Mez 2001), Queertexters (Rhodes 2004), Zinesters (Antropy 2012), Xenofeminists (Laboria Cuboniks 2014) and Glitch Feminists (Russell 2020). These self-consciously styled literary works celebrate the complexity of their own construction and reading. The manifesto as a literary genre is a call to social action. As a participatory and conversational form, it invites the reader to become an active player or an interactor in a narratological, discursive, semiotic and/or literal revolution. As a twenty-first-century form, it is especially well suited to feminist digital culture because of its three major properties: it is reciprocal, viral, and memetic

(Yanoshevsky 2009: 275).¹ As Leslie Heme says, “The manifesto beckons adaptation and adoption into practice; it squirms into the subconscious” (Heme 2013: 12).

Cyberfeminism rocketed onto the international stage in a consciousness-raising flash with the publication of the Australian performance troupe VNS Matrix’s “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the Twenty-first Century” in 1991.² Publication may not be the right word though since, in this pre-web incarnation, the manifesto was initially broadcast on a billboard. The Australian collective, which was active from 1991 to 1997, was comprised of four women: Virginia Barratt, Francesca da Rimini, Julianne Pierce, and Josephine Starrs. They coined the term “cyberfeminist” to capture the *zeitgeist* of their radical feminist acts and blatantly viral agenda.

VNS Matrix’s choice of the manifesto as a medium and delivery system is appropriately double-barreled: both performative and political. The manifesto is “a plural and open form,” according to the French literary scholar Galia Yanoshevsky, for which “‘crisis’ is its *raison d’être*” and whose goal is to “‘question the system’” (Demers, qtd. Yanoshevsky 2009: 263). By design a violent act, “The manifesto has a particular performativity: it does not ‘merely describe a history of rupture, but produces such a history, seeking to create this rupture actively through its own intervention’” (2009: 266). Literary critic Marjorie Perloff has argued that the manifesto emerged as a literary genre and narrative form in the hands of Italian Futurist F. T. Marinetti (1984: 71). It is easy to see this narrative impulse in the “Cyberfeminist Manifesto” as well, which proclaims itself “the virus of the new world order/rupturing the symbolic from within” as “saboteurs of big daddy mainframe,” “terminators of the moral code,” and “mercenaries of slime.” We could also read this as an anti-narrative impulse with its always already future orgasmic desire for infiltration, disruption, dissemination, and corruption. VNS Matrix went on to create video games and interactive CD-ROMs and, in 2015, a remix called “Undaddy Mainframe” was sent into space as a part of a larger project called “ForeverNow.” VNS Matrix’s work has been as viral and

¹I am paraphrasing her concepts for these are not precisely Galia Yanoshevsky’s terms. She identifies the three major sociopoetic functions of the manifesto on its readers and critics: (1) it has a reciprocal relationship to critics; (2) it has the ability to “‘contaminate’ theory in a way which makes theory start seeing itself, too, as real, as event, with a history and ideological and social underpinnings of its own;” and, (3) since the manifesto is repetitive, it has aesthetic and mimetic properties by design (Yanoshevsky 2009: 275).

²That same year, British cultural theorist Sadie Plant also chose that term to describe her recipe for defining the feminizing influence of technology on Western society and its members. Around the same time in Canada Nancy Paterson, a celebrated high-tech installation artist, also wrote an article called “Cyberfeminism” for Stacy Horn’s Echo Gopher server. Clearly the time for cyberfeminism as emergent practice had arrived.

FIGURE 1 VNS Matrix, “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century” (1991).

unstoppable as it has been global in its inspiration, most recently in the birth of Laboria Cuboniks (whose work I will discuss later in this chapter).

The act of defining cyberfeminism is harder than dating its emergence, for its self-reflexive history is about the exploding of categories and the refusal of closure or classification. One half of VNS Matrix, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt, call it:

a catalytic moment, a collective memetic mind-virus that mobilised geek girls everywhere and unleashed the blasphemous techno-porno code that made machines pleasurable and wet. a linguistic weapon of mass instruction, the manifesto struck at the mass erection of technopatriarchal order. we loved with machines, in a most unholy alliance.

(Forever Now)

At the first cyberfeminist conference in Germany in 1997, the Old Boy's Network (OBN)—an organization that came to be the central hub of cyberfeminist thought for a while—drafted the “100 Anti-Theses of Cyberfeminism.” These rules were multilingual and nonbinding, ranging from the whimsical to the militant. Cyberfeminism was both “not a fragrance” and “not caffeine-free” as well as “not a praxis,” “tradition,” or “ideology.” Cyberfeminism was “not a structure,” “a lack,” or “a trauma,” but also “not without connectivity” and “not an empty space.” These not-empty definitions refused binaries at the same time as they refused the two-dimensional spaces of print culture. I have defined cyberfeminism elsewhere as “a way of redefining the conjunctions of identities, genders, bodies and technologies, specifically as they relate to power dynamics” and to texts.

Cyberfeminist texts were and are a celebration of multiplicity. They often refuse single authorship and exist outside institutional spaces. They exist in opposition to what Faith Wilding called “the Tupperware aesthetics” of postfeminist netchicks and grrl sites with their tendency to reinscribe female stereotypes, and were set against the phallogentric establishment. As a postured and self-conscious form of embodiment—as opposed to the masculinist cyberpunk celebration of virtual disembodiment so popular in the 1990s—cyberfeminist writing seized a politicized and historical context to write itself free of old boundaries. It sought to write a new future. Faith Wilding called it a “strategy” for claiming and taking up space (“Future is Femal”).

This goal was not a new one. It was a continuation of the work that experimental women writers in print had been undertaking for more than a century. Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein both experimented with voice, vision, the senses, the continuous present tense, broken sequences, multiple voices, and subversive genres in ways that would be right at home on the web. More recently, Christine Brooke-Rose, Nicole Brossard, Carole Maso, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Gail Scott, Avital Ronell, and Carla Harryman have experimented with ruptured narrative, visual text, and fractured sequences on the page that are akin to cyberfeminist experimentation in digital narrative. Sharing similarities to the conceptual arts, new media writings are more like performance or installation art than other conceptual forms—which is why Barratt can identify such a clear lineage from VNS Matrix all the way to the Russian political troupe Pussy Riot (*Forever Now*). The digital medium in skilled cyberfeminist hands—like the works of Shelley Jackson, Mez, Carmin Karasic, Kate Pullinger, Caitlin Fisher, J. R. Carpenter, and Anna Anthropy—is used to foreground ruptures in language and text, in space and sound, in bodies, words, and images. Michael Joyce calls these linked narratives “a conversation with structure” (2000 94). The hybrid nature of the meeting of media allow these Hackermaker Aesthetics (Guertin 2015) and writers to “work the interface” between the creative process and reading, between bodies and materialist concerns, between conventions of

the media and discourses within texts (Moyes 1994: 309). Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” also called for re-embodied seeing as a way of re-connecting the textual, material, and technological worlds. As I stated earlier, Barratt of VNS Matrix believed the language tradition and revolution was an integral part of feminist writing in the 1980s and 1990s.

The first lengthy study of feminist work in the new media was my own *Queen Bees and the Hum of the Hive: An Overview of Feminist Hypertext’s Subversive Honeycombings* published in *BeeHive* in 1998. At that time I found an overview of women’s works was necessary because even though women were leading practitioners in electronic literature, they were already being written out of official narratives and literary criticism in the 1990s. In that hypertextual essay, I examined issues of language, discourse, translation, and gendered modes of speaking that are evident in many early feminist works on the web. As a first survey, *Queen Bees* is most concerned with cataloguing the myriad discourses and texts. In 1999, my Gallery, *Assemblage: The Online Women’s New Media Gallery*, debuted at the trAce Online Writing Community to further the goals of my earlier essay and to begin a conversation—still ongoing—about women’s digital literary praxis. It is now archived in the British Museum. In February 2000, Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink and I published a selection of highlights from the Gallery as “The Progressive Dinner Party” (in homage to Judy Chicago) in Jennifer Ley’s online journal, *Riding the Meridian*. Other works have appeared in book form since then, including Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein’s *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique + Creativity* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) and My Mother Was a Computer: *Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (2005), Jacqueline Rhodes’ *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modem*, Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh’s *Cyberfeminism 2.0* (2012), and my own *Digital Prohibition: Piracy and Authorship in New Media Art* (2012). Sadly though, feminist theory and those early documents and works by women writers quickly obsolesce on the spaces of the web, and are too easily forgotten or ignored by critics. Memory is short in cyberspace. More recently other scholars have returned to those early authors’ texts to again begin to recatalogue and remember the mothers of the digital text.³

VNS Matrix’s “Manifesto” is just one of a chorus of feminist voices that has sought to rupture the patrilineal continuum. Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) pre-dates it, of course, and has been influential in many areas and fields. In fact, Haraway revisits the manifesto form thirty years later with a new work called *Manifestly Haraway* (2016), which brings

³For instance, I am thinking most recently of Kathi Inman Berens’ article “Judy Malloy’s seat at the (database) table: a feminist reception history of early hypertext,” on Malloy’s pioneering work *Uncle Roger*, published in 2014.

together her earlier piece with her new “Companion Species Manifesto.” In her earlier work, Haraway calls for the body to become an “agent” rather than “a resource” where we are capable of “situated conversation at every level of its articulation” (1991: 200). Boundaries are drawn and erased through our physical mappings of space, and if we can transform our conversations with the texts into action we might craft a program for feminist embodied interference. This sounds like a program for political occupation. Likewise, allowing our browsing to insert its body as an agent or interactor in textual spaces like the manifesto will multiply subjectivities—and therefore perspectives—many times over. Virtual bodies are permeable and interweave the corporeal with machine language in oppositional stances. These interweavings for Haraway’s cyborg create “webs of power” that birth “new couplings, new coalitions” (1991: 170); they are permeable to language and information being nonbinary—having not one code or common language, but many codes and many languages. They are viruses performing circulation in networked space.

As a form of pure performance, Mez’s Mezangelle blends the flows of the digital with the rupture of the linked space creating a subjective landscape and language for an aestheticization of the personal-political continuum. Manifestos have definite links to performance and to theatre, according to Martin Pucher. In “Manifesto = Theatre,” he argues that “both involve the act of making visible. The manifesto has a particular performativity; it does not ‘merely describe a history of rupture, but produces such a history, seeking to create this rupture actively through its own intervention’” (Pucher 2002: 449–50; qtd. Yanoshevsky 2009: 266). We might read the whole of Mez’s oeuvre as just such a manifesto-driven performance that intervenes in the fabric of language and the self in the name of subjectivity. Mezangelle is not a single manifesto, but a protocol, a platform, and a praxis for Net.Wurkers. A recombinant language, Mezangelle works with discarded bits of code, snippets of words, archaic symbols, slang, markup, and ASCII to craft literary manifestos. A pioneer of the meeting of the linguistic and the performative at the boundaries of form, in 2008 she was a tweeter-in-online-residence for New Media Scotland. Over the space of a month, she tweeted *Twitterwurking*, a complete, full-length work in Mezangelle. As a protocol, Mezangelle seeks to both impose and relinquish control at the same time. Eugene Thacker in the introduction to Alex Galloway’s *Protocol* states, “the founding principle of the Net is control—not freedom—control has existed from the beginning.” Protocol opens and obstructs flows of data in concert (Thacker 2004: xv), just as the manifesto recruits and relinquishes us at the same time. As I wrote in my book, *Digital Prohibition*, her language

is the space of Mezan play, manipulation, and logic. It is always in tension with itself, always existing in the contradictory spaces of multilevel logics. By mastering the logistics of control, she finds the free play in the system.

Mezian aesthetics operate always just outside of language in the not-quite visual realm. Composed of ruptures, openings, and jumps, her words are always in the midst of delivering poetic shocks and re-envisionings. Playful disturbance is the process by which the reader floats through the dynamic and sensory experience of reading her art-theory mélange.

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Protocol is an aesthetic that influences our every move in the Net.Wurk. Both manifestos' and protocol's contradictions are hardwired into the system like a virus. Mez's textual interventions make for slow reading by design as they fuse performance, digital material, and viral media. A truly original writer, Mez's voice has been compared to William Shakespeare, James Joyce, and Emily Dickinson, among others (Mez, Interview 2007). Her texts are embodied spaces that rupture language.

In the twenty-first century, women's bodies have become more visible, but by and large their voices have not. Crushing anti-female forces that have emerged—especially but not only in the United States, from a neo-Conservativist turn in public opinion—are making it dangerous for women to speak out. Since the 1990s, this has made the web a dangerous space, and resulted in fewer overtly political tracts like the manifestos I have discussed. These attacks on women—frequently called “the war on women”—have been highly visible from the erosion of women's reproductive rights to Donald Trump's campaign trail hate speech to #GamerGate. #GamerGate arose in August 2014 when a small group of misogynist gamers set out to silence feminist dialog around computer games and gaming. Threatened by the rising popularity of games with women (who now comprise about 40 percent of gamers), a group of anonymous trolls launched an all-out war. A game developer named Zoe Quinn was the catalyst and first target. She was driven from her home as the result of threats and doxxing related to her game *Depression Quest*. From there the trolls singled out Anita Sarkeesian, a popular YouTube personality and pop culture critic who tackles sexism in games with a series called “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games.” Katrin Higher calls the consolidated attacks, doxxing and threats against these women's lives and safety “misogynistic terrorism.” What is more frightening is that they are not the only targets. The Game Developers' 2015 Conference set out to address the issue, but it was too dangerous a topic to run a panel on. Soliciting anonymous comments from women game developers instead, the conference organizers showed a devastating video called “The Empty Chair” which demonstrates in chilling fashion what female game developers endure. SXSW, the popular media conference in Austin, Texas, also later ran a panel on the topic of sexism in games in response to a cancelled event and criticism that they were doing too little to support women. The violence of #GamerGate, however, has gradually shifted the rhetoric in the gaming industry as people now seek to distance themselves from the anonymous

trolls. This outpouring of violent #GamerGate hate has also contributed to a birth of a number of new cyberfeminist manifestos.

Ironically enough, anonymity was initially one of the attributes of the web that was so empowering to women. According to Clare Evans, in the 1990s cyberfeminists had “championed” anonymity “as a method for transcending gender,” but now anonymity is weaponized to enable violent assaults on women everywhere online from comments to email to Twitter. Evans says, “It’s not that the CyberFeminists failed. It’s that as the Venn diagrams of digital and real life have edged into near-complete overlap, the problems of the real world have become the problems of the digital world. The web is no longer a separate space; we are inseparable from the web” (Evans). In the past, the collective has been seen as a successful anonymous strategy for the cloaking of cyberfeminist dialog and protection. As everything old is new again, the Carnegie Mellon-based group Deep Lab is now putting these strategies to work again in response to #GamerGate. Their manifesto is a book, written over five days in December 2014, in an effort that was equal parts “hackathon, charrette, and a micro-conference” (<http://www.deeplab.net/#the-book>). They describe themselves as:

a collaborative group of researchers, artists, writers, engineers, and cultural producers interested in privacy, surveillance, code, art, social hacking, and anonymity. Members of Deep Lab are engaged in ongoing critical assessments of contemporary digital culture and exploit the hidden potential for creative inquiry lying dormant within the deep web. Deep Lab supports its members’ ability to output *anonymously via proxy tools; in this way, our research can remain fluid via multi-pseudonymous identity*. Deep Lab promotes creative research and development that challenges traditional forms of representation and distribution, evaluating these practices alongside typical traffic analysis identification. This process leverages the research of Deep Lab to contend with outdated modes of understanding culture within traditional social structures. (my emphasis; Addie Wagenknecht, Founder of Deep Lab, Deep Lab: 11)

Deep Lab thereby enables feminist dialog and dissemination of research by offering a new publishing platform via proxy. “[F]emale hackers,” it says, “must engage with the future, in order to make our presence in history indelible” (12).

Another recently formed global cyberfeminist collective, Laboria Cuboniks (2015), ascribe the decline of women’s power in digital spaces to the rising dominance of visual culture online. Subtitled the “politics for alienation,” the Xenofeminist Manifesto calls for the “depetrification” (Laboria Cuboniks, Zero 0x00) of capitalism in the name of a more universalist model for world and identity creation. The name Laboria Cuboniks is a puzzle drawn from an anagram of another pseudonymous

group, Nicolas Bourbaki, a collective of twentieth-century French mathematicians who authored treatises and books on a more abstract vision of math. According to the imaginative, dextrous, and persistent Laboria Cuboniks, the power of the sexist and objectifying gaze has re-inscribed the old gender disparities, and that power supercharges “modes of identity policing, power relations and gender norms in self-representation” (Laboria Cuboniks, *Parity*: 013). This collective sees social media and hate speech twisting and stifling the web’s early potential for revolutionary acts perpetuated through “memes like ‘anonymity,’ ‘ethics,’ ‘social justice,’ and ‘privilege-checking’” (Laboria Cuboniks, “*Parity*”: 0x0D). “Valuable platforms for connection, organization, and skill-sharing become clogged with obstacles to productive debate positioned as if they are debate,” they say (“*Parity*”: 0x0C). Neither seeking to resurrect 1990s cyberfeminism nor throw the cyberfeminist baby out with the bathwater, Laboria Cuboniks call not for revolution, but for “mutations” and reanimation of the “long game of history” where xenofeminists can abolish gender, change nature, and master computation. Its “*Politics for Alienation*” wants to create a new language, dismantle the human genome, and abolish patrilineal constructs like nature and the family. Xenofeminism makes strange with capitalism and neoliberal policies to rewrite gender for a constantly moving target of a mutant xenofeminist philosophy.

The return of the literary manifesto as cyberfeminist/xenofeminist literature is a welcome turn of events in a time of Hackermaker Aesthetics, the active creation of alternative spaces for women for creative practice (Guertin 2015). Manifestos make for spirited, polemical, performative events. If, as Donna Haraway says, the body is a machine made out of words inscribed by time and memory, then the performance space of manifesto-fueled subjectivity is not simply uncontainable, but contagious and nomadic as well. It is transgressive speaking that circulates outside patrilineal culture, and Haraway’s cyborg naturally enacts its transgression in language frame by frame through body-based thinking: the audacious site of this truly monstrous thought process. A collective is a conceptually complex subjective embodiment, forming the skin of mediation and connection between realities, the tangled interface between the virtual and the real, between lives lived both online and off. Subjectivity writ large as a manifesto is uncontainable, viral, xenomorphic, aesthetic, political, and doubled, existing “both inside and outside” the “creative domain” and “within the field of artistic production” (qtd. in Yanoshevsky 2009). It is also integrally interconnected with the cosmological, narrative fabric of women’s lives, with the ruptured gaps women leap and the story women travel through. The twenty-first-century feminist e-manifesto is the origin story in a time of multiple subjects and genders, and it is the meta-space everyone needs to occupy to disrupt the overarching master narrative of misogyny terrorism in digital culture.

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