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From Fe-Mail to f-e-mail & Beyond: Cyberfeminist Networks on the Web

www.arts.ucsb.edu/f-e-mail

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(german version)

Communication is of central concern when addressing gender issues - it is the place where our differences are most obvious. When communication becomes computer mediated, particularly through networks, the importance of creating environments that are desig ned by and for women cannot be overstated.

Although explanations vary widely, feminist scholars have described the female worldview as significantly different from the male worldview.[1] Many have argued from a psychological perspective, that "female identity revolves around interconnectedness and relationship" and conversely, that male identity "stresses separation and independence."[2] Although the truth is somewhere in between and much messier, it is commonly accepted that 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus'.(Gray,1992) The net allows us to create a space where we can celebrate our differences and accept the fluidity of our gender constructions.

f-e-mail is conceived as a computer mediated extension of physical "snail mail" networks such as Women Beyond Borders. It is designed to showcase women artists who utilise networked technologies, promote education in digital arts for women and link out to the women's networks on or off-line. Although these projects allude to similarities with mail art of the past three decades, there is one significant difference -- these networks are specifically designed by and for women. Computer mediated networks, inh erently chaotic, non-linear and fluid are natural environments for women artists to experiment, exchange ideas, create support systems and flourish.

Eternal Networks

In the late fifties and early sixties, three major nodes of correspondence art emerged: the New York Correspondence School in the US, the Nouveau Realists in Europe and the Fluxus movement, active in both continents and Japan. In 1963, Robert Fillou devel oped his concept of "The Eternal Network" which was centred around the human condition rather then arts. It echoed an earlier statement made in Robert Motherwell's influential 1951 edition of The Dada Painter's and Poets by Tristan Tzara who insisted that participants in Dada "had repudiated all distinction between life and poetry". (Welsh, 1995) The Eternal Network placed it's stress on dialogue, process, group research and community with artists such as Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and Christo all participat ing in the process at some point. From the early 60's, using the postal system, the Eternal Network flourished, but remained largely invisible and ignored by the established art world based on the notion of the master, masterworks or masterpieces. But eve n in this elusive movement, women remained on the fringes. Mail art emerged as a reaction against the established art world, yet very quickly became male art -- another form of the old boys network. Women had difficulties with the rules and hierarchies th at emerged with the mail art

manifestos, and perhaps the communication differences feminists have pointed to had something to do with it. One response to this problem was by mail artist Frey Zabitsky who in the early 80's designed a rubber stamp with a sl ogan: "men make manifestos, women make friends". (Friedman, 1995)
Many artists who were active in mail art in the 60's withdrew form the network by the mid seventies in response to the uneven aesthetics, but Anna Banana from San Francisco believed that the process of communication was more important then the aesthetics. She self-published VILE, a magazine dedicated to mail art. The most popular issue was number 6, "Fe-Mail" Art, a collection of mail art works exclusively by women. The contents were broken down into three categories: Postal Art, Postcards and Corresponde nce. Fe-mail reproduced works by over one hundred women from the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, Brazil, England, France, Holland, Germany, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Argentina. Luminaries such as Yoko Ono, Martha Wilson, Alison Knowles participated. 700 copies were printed September 7, 1978, exactly twenty years ago. (Banana, 1995) This magazine could be the most significant predecessor of network projects designed specifically for women artists.
Twenty years into the women's art movement, women artists still lack significant support in the art world. [3] According to the Guerrilla Girls, art museums average 15% women in curated exhibits, with minority women at .003%. 4% of museum acquisitions ar e of work by women artists. But, with the advent of the personal computer and the World Wide Web, it is possible to create a significant archive of women artists and a space to exhibit, publish, exchange ideas and resources.

From Fe-Mail to f-e-mail

Since the early 1970's, there has been a surge in scholarship on women artists, resulting in the discovery of hundreds and thousands of women artists throughout history and from all over the world. Around the same time, in January 1975, the first persona l computer came out -- the Altair 8800. It is ironic that one of the most male dominated of all fields -- computer science, would develop a machine with the potential to destabilise entrenched patriarchal systems. Sherry Turkle (1984), in her study of the cultural and psychological world of computers and computer science, notes that the different methods brought to bear on computer science by girls and women reform our ideas of what constitutes science. In particular, she believes that the computer plays a special role in this process, because it provides an entry to formal systems that is more accessible to women. "It can be negotiated with, it can be responded to, it can be psychologized" (p.118). The differences here are utilised to redefine computer science and the gender categories associated with many scientiology, it is possible to construct identity, sexuality and even gender, however we may imagine ourselves to be. This is an ideal environment for those who couldn't fit into a preconceived idea of what an artist is, especially those whose work is not easily defined and even more difficult to categorise. Significant numbers of women who have been educated in art and art history suddenly have a creative outlet that doesn't require large capital or particular connections to get into. One notable example of this kind of art activism is Kathy Huffman who move d from being a successful video curator in the early eighties to becoming a successful cyberfeminist/artist on the Web. Since 1995, she has collaborated on a number of Internet communication works with Eva Wohlgemuth including Siberian Deal, Face Settings and a Cyber co-cooking event.[4] Face Settings, their most recent Internet project, investigates communication between women, on and off-line, and establishes an on-line discussion for gender issues. It is a good example of art, feminism and networking colliding on the net. Another more extreme example of this kind of collision is the VNS Matrix. Their opening statement says that they "emerged from the cyberswamp during a Southern Australian Summer circa 1991, on a mission to hijack the toys from techno cowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent." [5]

There are a number of women however, who work on the Web without directly embedding feminist issues into their work, or choose to work with women exclusively. The Web allows for many points of view, and luckily we don't have to abide by one strict manifes to or code of conduct. The age of dogmatically correct feminism is finally over. As Donna Haraway points out, international women's movements have constructed a `women's experience' that is a fiction and a fact of the most crucial, political kind. As she puts it, "Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression and so of possibility."

At one point Haraway famously declared, "I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess, "flying in the face of conventional feminist wisdom that science and technology are patriarchal blights on the face of nature. As a

cyborg, Haraway is a product of science and technology, and she doesn't see much point in the so-called goddess feminism, which preaches that women can find freedom by sloughing off the modern world and discovering their supposed spiritual connection to Mother Earth. Haraway has become a heroine o f cyberfeminists. (Kunzru, H. 1997)

It is especially inspiring to follow some of the new generation of women who are networking on the World Wide Web. For instance, The Friendly Grrls guide greets us by introducing us to the new language of the Internet. "Girls are not girls, but grrls, sup er kewl (cool) young women who have the tenacity and drive to surf the net, network with other young women on-line and expand the presence of young women in new and emerging technologies. So get your goggles on, your mouse hand ready and dive into cybers pace with the Friendly Grrls Guide...you can't go wrong!" [6]

According to Sadie Plant, director of the Centre for Research into Cybernetic Culture at Warwick University in England, "Cyberfeminism, is an alliance between women, machinery, and new technology. There's a long-standing relationship between information t echnology and women's liberation."[7] If one inputs the keyword 'woman' on any one of the search engines on the World Wide Web, it is clear that the relationship is healthier than ever -- women and women's networks are flourishing online. Many homepages d edicated for women's issues have been established, from women computer scientists discussing the discrimination they face on the job, to moms who post their problems, advice and kid of the week pictures.[8] This is particularly important for geographicall y isolated women who up to now wouldn't have such access to empowering information and supportive environments. It is safe to predict that in less then a decade computers will be as ubiquitous as televisions and phones are today. This promises to have a s ignificant impact on the social life and customs of our increasingly global village.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), could play a major role in str

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Notes:

1) Worldview, language and nonverbal communication, particularly the use of space and/or time, are often identified as important elements of intercultural communication. Worldview refers to a "culture's orientation towards such things as God, humanity, na ture, the universe, and other philosophical issues that are concerned with the concept of being.
2) Becky Mulvoney writes a good overview of gender difference in communication in her online essay "Gender Differences in Communication: An Intercultural Experience"
A link to this paper can be accessed via the f-e-mail homepage.
3) According to the 1990 US study, Gender Discrimination in the Artfield, 50.7% of all visual artists are female; women hold 53.1% of the degrees in art, yet 80% of art faculty are males, male artists make 68.6% of the total

art income, male artists recei ve 73% of grants/fellowships.
4) Siberian Deal, Cyber co-cooking, Face to Face can be accessed via the World Wide Web: http://thing.at/face/index1.htm
5) The VNS Matrix are Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt. Their site is at: http://206.251.6.116/geekgirl/001stick/vns/vns.html
6) Friendly Grrls guide is at: http://www.webgrrls.com
7) An online interview with Sadie Plant published by Geekgirl magazine can be accessed via the f-e-mail homepage
8) A ressource for moms online can be found at: http:// www.yoyoweb.com/wospace
Ellen Spertus at MIT authors a page Women in Computer Science that has lots of helpful links: http://www.ai.mit.edu/people/ellens/gender.html

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