

Self-relation as Self-negation in Post-Internet Art

**A talk given at the Technology is Not Neutral conference and exhibition, Watermans Gallery, December 2016:
<http://technologyisnotneutral.com/Outline>**

In 1991 VNS Matrix – leveled the abjection of the female body *against* the ‘rational’ control space of the patriarchal matrix

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

The Internet embodied a paradox: it was the manifestation of scientific abstraction pushed to the ultimate degree, by which a parallel space of disembodied symbolic operation had been created, yet it also allowed for a post-corporeal’ space to emerge in which the body was radically opened to fantasy, elaboration and transformation.

VNS member Julianne Pierce later elaborated: "Cyberfeminism was about ideas, irony, appropriation and hands-on skilling up in the data terrain. It combined a utopic vision of corrupting patriarchy with an unbounded enthusiasm for the new tools of technology. It embraced gender and identity politics, allowing fluid and non-gendered identities to flourish through the digital medium. The post-corporeal female would be an online frontier woman, creating our own virtual worlds and colonising the amorphous world of cyberspace."

Jump-cut to the era of post-internet art – a way of designating *some* digital art made after the introduction of Web 2 in 2005.

Post-internet and performance artist Ann Hirsch commented in 2014:

‘All my work has to do with sex, gender and the shame I feel around those things.’
‘The internet ended up becoming a big part of my life where I ended up experiencing gender politics, and shame around sex.’

And in an article in Mute magazine in 2012, another so-called post-internet artist, Jesse Darling remarked:

Art about technology often ends up making both art and technology look really dated and capricious within a year or two. Great big wow, great big innovation award at Arts Electronica or somewhere, and next year it’s an app on everyone’s smartphone and nobody gives a shit. Plus, this nerdism or generational elitism – we’re-the-only-ones-who-know-how-to-use-this-stuff-ism – isn’t interesting to me. I’m interested

in the human condition, as it changes with the times, and/or abides despite everything.

The more the internet became seamlessly embedded into all of life, the more 'intuitive' it was to use, the more its community was converted into users by a handful of corporations who own and control its use, the less artists – female and feminist artists included - became interested in exploring its technical specificities.

Instead, to make a crass generalization, artists working with the internet have become more and more interested in self-presentation and its possibilities as the photographic image becomes the main component of messages.

To use Michel Foucault's schema, the aesthetic of engagements with technology seem to focus increasingly on the internet not as an information communication network but rather as a 'technology of the self'.

What does this mean?

For Foucault, a technology is linked to areas of science through which humans gain knowledge of themselves (he gives the example of economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, penology). Each of these areas entail certain 'truth games' linked to specific techniques.

He identifies four major types of technology (whose definition unites techniques and technical apparatuses):

- 1) Technologies of production
- 2) Technologies of sign systems, which permit meanings, symbols, signification
- 3) Technologies of power]
- 4) Technologies of the self which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection of immortality.

In artist Jennifer Chan's characterisation:

Post-internet art is: 'Peer-responsive, profoundly cute and personal' One can slightly twist this statement to reveal the more general dimension of power that runs through it: In responding to peers it has become essential to show or display oneself in an inculcated idiom named 'personal', whose most acceptable face is 'cuteness'.

While this regime originates outside of art, and while its transposition into the field of art is always highly self-conscious and mediated, we nevertheless need to ask what it means for the earlier exploration of information technologies to disappear behind the exploration of the net as a narcissistic panopticon of self-presentation. And in specific, today we need to ask what

that means for the many different struggles against gender oppression that we group together under the term 'feminism'.

Jennifer Chan, Ann Hirsch and Amalia Ulman are all very different artists – despite their reductive tagging as 'post-internet' artists.

Hirsch explores her own sexualized body in the cross fire of the online, anonymous, and telematic field of desire with a certain dispassionate humour that seems to psychically divorce her from her own objectification. She's the ditsiest 'camwhore' that ever was. Yet she has acknowledged that her exploration of this role is non-ironic –

'The Scandalishious Project not only looks like all the other videos of girls dancing in their pants that you might find on YouTube, it IS that. People are often mistaken in thinking I am critiquing or parodying the girls who are on YouTube dancing or monologuing. I am not. I am joining them.'

'I believe that whenever you put your body online, in some way you are in conversation with porn.'

One immediately wants to ask whether men feel this too? And if this is true only for women, why do they want to put their bodies online at all, if not to pornographise themselves, and if they do want to do so, why they nonetheless want to claim that their work has feminist objectives?

Still, it's good to resist such moralisms when trying to think through the seismic shift from cyberfeminism to today's gender-troubled net art.

Amalia Ulman's trail of instagram images (albeit time-limited, and now a limited edition of photographs rather than an ongoing practice) seem to fully inhabit the identify of the hot young thing, overly serious about her own beauty, obviously adrift in a world of brain-dead yet privileged consumption and beauty treatments. Perhaps the performance is simply more slick and convincing, or maybe the narcissism is that bit more real. Does it even matter?

Jennifer Chan's work occasionally pitches her own image into a hyper kitsch world of superficiality, jingles, gifs, video footage and online gaming so tinselly and thin that the play on sincerity, self-exposure confession becomes highly refractory.

So if the performance of self is highly varied and possibly worthy of more detailed scrutiny than I can supply in this short time, what unites these artists is – as I've said – that for them the internet is a space that compels and intensifies a late capitalist technology of the self.

When Foucault was developing this concept in the pre-web 1970s, he was primarily concerned with tracking how the techniques of the self had transitioned from ancient Greece – when the notion of the care of the self was

first introduced as a technique of enlightened self-relation and self-governance – to the contemporary moment, when the techniques of the self had become a tool of biopolitical capitalism – the now familiar concept of the ‘entrepreneurship of the self’. For Socrates and the tradition he founded, ‘knowing oneself becomes the object of the quest of concern for self’

And this, Foucault says, was political because: ‘The effort of the soul to know itself is the principle on which just political action can be founded.’ To pay meticulous attention to oneself is, at the same time, to pay attention to ones relations to others. Elsewhere he has discussed the value of *enkrateia*, the Greek principle of self-relation or self-governance, by which the relation to the self, that is self-controlled, is therefore also always a relation to others that is self-restrained.

Yet to reduce this very drastically – probably too drastically – the relation to the self that is conjured in Jennifer Chan’s phrase ‘peer-responsive’ – is a reverse movement to the Greek notion of self-relation. The relation to the self is mediated by an internalization of others’ judgments, expectations, demands etc. of oneself; or, in composing oneself in the form of an image to be circulated and consumed by others, one preempts the reaction of others before relating to oneself, thus interrupting self-relation. Maybe we could say that the relation to others that preempts our self-relation becomes a form of *self-negation*.

While many female artists today are right, I think, to draw attention to this urgent crisis of, especially, female negation that operates through the specular economy of the net, the strategy of identification – whether sincere, ironic or post-ironic – blunts the tools that cyberfeminists of early net culture importantly discovered. In calling the ‘clitoris a direct line to the matrix’ they understood that the body and its desires has the potency and force by which the patriarchal regulations encoded in all Foucauldian layers of technology (and all the dominations associated to them) can be ruptured. If embodiment is subject to external schematization, then this schematization can be leveled as a weapon against the regime of power that wants to fix it.

Greek self-relation, which unpacks as a care of the self based in knowledge of the self, is political because it is an image of subjectification that links how we treat ourselves to how we affect others, as well, how we treat others to how we treat ourselves. When self-relation becomes objectified and spectacularised, then so does our relation to others – and vice versa.

Because the internet is a technology that operates seamlessly across all Foucault’s definitions of technology – production, the symbolic, power and the self – there has been an intensification of the mutual impact of each layer upon the other. Ignoring the degree to which the technical layer of technology impacts directly on the layer of self-relation is, in my estimation, not only dangerous but perhaps more importantly a massive missed opportunity.

We get a feeling for this in the work like Sidsel Meineche Hansen’s recent exhibition *Second Sex War*, held at Gasworks this summer. The work pivoted

on a VR scenario in which the artist converts an off-the-shelf game avatar from a sexualized and disposable object for male pleasure into a translucent phallus-bearing female who has sex with a potato-like partner. For female viewers donning the Oculus Rift headset, this approximated the sensation of having and controlling the phallus. This was a powerful demonstration of how, by simply inverting body/power relations at the level of a simulation, the gendering of technology and bodies became not only blatantly visible but eminently transformable. Rather than the sad mimesis of the self-commodification of women in social media, Hansen's work allowed for a rerouting of relations, causing technology's regulation of gender to be reversed: gaming technology, if played against the gender-code, can be a vehicle for the expression of a truly delirious post-gendered desire. A far more serious game than its original coders ever intended. This suggests a care for the self in which the self is not assumed or fixed, but listened to, discovered, retooled, freed to create new knowledge and relations to others.

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