

Nothing is Certain [Flesh, the Postbody and Cyberfeminism] VNS Matrix

Interviews. Nova Delahunty



In this interview especially for Ars Electronica 96, art critic and cultural theorist Nova Delahunty spoke with gashgirl, Josephine Starrs and Julianne Pierce, members of the Australian computer art group VNS Matrix.

Nova: In 1991 you created the image A cyberfeminist manifesto for the 21st century. It was one of the first appearances of the word "cyberfeminism". How do you think that cyberfeminism has developed as a "meme"?

Julianne: At the same time as we started using the concept of cyberfeminism, it also began to appear in other parts of the world. It was like a spontaneous meme which emerged at around the same time, as a response to ideas like "cyberpunk" which were popular at the time. Since then the meme has spread rapidly and is certainly an idea which has been embraced by many women who are engaged with techno theory and practice. What is great about the cyberfeminist meme is that it is totally adaptable and flexible. When we created the *cyberfeminist manifesto* [URL:

<http://www.next.com.au/spyfood/geekgirl/001stick/vns/vns.html>] we certainly didn't prescribe any doctrine — it was a vehicle for us to make statements about our work, and comments on technology. The concept has grown and expanded as many different people develop the ideas of cyberfeminism — the meme ebbs and flows as it is shaped by artists, writers, theorists and even publishers. I think also that is important as a "feminism". Having become quite unfashionable in the last few years, feminism has been re-shaped by cyberfeminism into a contemporary mould. Feminism does really need to adapt and change to contemporary thought, and cyberfeminism has put issues which are important to women on the techno-agenda. Many women find it a useful tool to engage with and critique technology. Cyberfeminists are not anti-technology, on the contrary, they are technophiles and geeks who can't get enough of their machines.

Nova: The central image of A cyberfeminist manifesto ... is a hybrid figure — half crustacean, half woman — what do you think this image says of evolution, and how does it reflect your vision of the future?

Julianne: This image, which we call "pod woman", is more metaphorical than literal. Her defiant naked torso is joined to a bug-like creature, she is almost an inversion of the minotaur, instead of a horse's head she has a crustacean's body. This image arose out of the process of trying to represent what "future woman" would be. We created it for a billboard which was displayed for one month on one of Sydney's busiest roads. We were intrigued by advertising images, and how women are represented in these sites, with particular interest in how the vision of "futuristic" female is portrayed through the media and advertising. We wanted to subvert the image of the fembot, with her perfectly rounded chrom-plated arse. Thus "pod-woman" is both a comment on the construction of the fetishised female figure and an attempt to create a bold, strong image of future woman. She is also a statement on genetic manipulation, and possible aberrant couplings which may occur in the laboratories of kinky genetic scientists. With genetic alteration and splicing anything may occur, why stop at the super-pig, why not create strange and unusual couplings, imagination is everything.

Nova: Do you think that cyberfeminism has been successful in alerting the techno-world to the enormous role that women are playing in the development of emergent technologies? Or do you believe that cyberfeminism is a renegade philosophy and practice, which has no desire to be integrated into mainstream thinking?

Josephine: I think Sadie Plant said it all when she said "Cyberfeminism is simply the recognition that the patriarchy is doomed".

gashgirl: Cyberfeminism as an anarchic aggravation of so-called mainstream techno and computer cultures has been a highly successful strategy of alerting these worlds that code chicks and beta babes are doing noteworthy weird shit with the new technologies. And often they are doing things that their male counterparts aren't. Don't know why. I get a kick every time one of us is quoted in those conservative news media like *TIME*, *Wired*, Murdoch's rags, straight TV shows, kid's games mags and the like. What better proof that the viral meme has infected the rotting body of post-industrial society.

GashGirl is a workshy net nerd who still gets quoted in the Australian issue of *TIME* dealing with Cyberporn saying ... it's okay to play on the net, girls, you can play mean. You can only be a renegade if there is something to oppose. And there is plenty wrong with the social and power relations of technology. I see our contribution as forming part of the ethical corpus of research in this area.

Nova: In *Wired* [April, 1996), Pamela McCorduck [in her article about Sherry Turkle] quotes Michael Joyce who says, "Perhaps the most single most underreported aspect of our time is that the most compelling and serious discourse about new technologies and cultural change proceeds from women." What is your response to this statement? Perhaps you could talk about some of the people that have influenced your own work.

Julianne: I would agree with this statement, especially in regard to the fact that women are developing inventive and critical discourses surrounding technology. Many women are engaged with creating conceptual and analytical frameworks by which to discuss and understand emergent technologies. The fact that this is underreported is probably due to the fact that these are conceptual rather than technological developments. So much reportage of "new technologies" concentrates on the hardware and software, rather than the wetware. If journals were more concerned with conceptual issues, perhaps women would appear more regularly in the pages of computer culture magazines. In many ways I am against reductionist arguments which divide men and women into separate camps — there are many men doing really interesting work who contribute enormously to a sophisticated and intelligent discourse

on emergent techno-culture. However, as Michael Joyce points out, women are too often neglected as vital contributors and shapers of cultural change. As long as this state of play exists, women will have to assert themselves and their opinions in order to be heard. Luckily, though, there are many women who command respect within this area. People such as Sherry Turkle are articulating fundamental and totally sensible theories in relation to techno-culture. Unfortunately, her new book is not yet available in Australia, but excerpts I have read point to a very realistic interpretation of how we relate to technology, and the effect it is having on lifestyle, behaviour and culture.

People who have influenced us? Well — the French theorist Julia Kristeva was a very early influence on our work, her writings about abjection and analysis of Lacanian thinking certainly shaped some of our earlier ideas. Sadie Plant from England has also been influential as have the ideas of Donna Haraway, Sandy Stone and Zo, Sofoulis. There are also many people who have inspired us — to name just a few — Virtual Valerie, River Phoenix, Graham Harwood & Matt Fuller, Linda Wallace, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, de Sade and Stelarc [who has made cameo appearances in our work].

gashgirl: As our work draws upon and uses many different media and strategies, e.g. video, film, music, sound, installation, text, sculpture and so on, we also bring to it memes derived from the work and ideas of artists in these fields. I've been infected by many vectors — Dumb Type, o[rphan] d[rif>t] Bataille, Angela Carter, Cavafy, Brett Easton Ellis, Portishead, Biosphere, machine hunger, Gomma, Atom Egoyan, Hal Hartley, Murasaki Shikibu, Margeurite Duras, Linda Dement, Chris Marker, Antonioni, Madonna, Urban Exile, Xray Specs. Their viruses have passed through me, left me indelibly marked. Can you see the traces in the work? These memes hover around consciousness, resonate, mutate, propagate. I want everything and nothing. The meme is everything and nothing. There is no place left to evolve. There is only death, and the net.

Nova: Do you think that gender is a redundant issue, or do you believe that gender should be maintained as a "control" in the development of discourses on "the future of evolution"?

gashgirl: The writer Doug Rice said to me in a recent email, "Gender dystopia, for me, is a struggle between memory, language, flesh, clothing." This is no simple univalent or even bivalent meme. For as long as there are social inequities based on gender discrimination we can't afford to drop gender from these discourses. The memes of cyberfeminism and gender terrorism infect each other continually.

Josephine: How can gender ever be redundant?

Julianne: An interesting and complex question, Nova — where does one begin? I feel that as culture becomes more and more complicated, gender needs to evolve as a sophisticated and contextualised discourse. Post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories have shed new light on the construction of identity and gender. These discourses have formulated, and I agree, that gender is constructed through and by culture, and that crude definitions such as male and female need to be reworked. Certainly within theories and practice of emergent technologies, these definitions are under the microscope. A fascination with new technologies seems to be the possibility of gender-hacking and playing around with identity via sites such as the internet. I believe that this is why the internet is such an important space — people can redefine and fantasise about themselves in all sorts of interesting and peculiar ways. To escape ones gender seems to be a "fin de siècle" pre-occupation, to explore other ways of constructing identity and the self. These sorts of interrogations do impact on how identity is constructed within the real world, traditional notions of male and female have certainly been

reworked and much of the accompanying baggage that goes with those labels has been jettisoned. Are you asking if male and female will become redundant, and as the future evolves, humanity as a species will become some sort of hybrid between the two? Well, this is hard to say, perhaps things would be better off this way — asexual non-biological reproduction etc. But where is the fun in this, Nova, what about sex appeal? I certainly believe that in discourses on "the future of evolution" that gender should be an issue. In many ways it seems that this discourse wants to transcend notions of gender, that the great leap forward via technology is about abandoning the flesh. Well, as long as we have bodies, gender will be an issue, the main point however, is how gender, as a defining concept, will be constructed and challenged in the next millennium. But perhaps we should also ask, how will gender and identity issues effect artificial life, AI and robots?

Nova: There seem to be several strands in current discussions on technology and evolution: that computer technologies themselves replicate evolution and fulfil the role of nature, in turn making nature itself obsolete; in order to survive, the human phenotype must adapt to rapidly developing technologies; the historical impact of technology and how these have shifted and altered evolutionary processes. These are fairly simplistic summaries, but nonetheless I am interested to know your reaction to these ideas.

Josephine: Oh, Nova, why do you buy into these dull theories? They merely distract us from the real issues.

Julianne: It is worrying to think that nature might become history. If it does, then the future of evolution is certainly extinction. In some ways the Luddites seem appealing, like the cockroaches they may survive the great computer crashes of the future, where us technophiles who are joined at the hip to our computers, will implode in nanoseconds in overloads of gigabytes. Certainly it has become a survival of the fittest, where the human phenotype has to adapt to survive. But this has always been the case with any new technology, we are incredibly adaptable and pervasive. On the other hand those that adapt and thrive do so at the expense of many others, the advancement of one society only happens at the expense of another. Inasmuch as I am interested in contemporary theories on the future of evolution, I am also concerned about whose futures we are talking about. Besides mediamemory, robotics and cyborg-culture, there are certainly many other consequences of technology that need rigorous discussion, such as the nature of work, the production of food, fresh water etc. I feel that the obsession with emerging technologies and the future has drawn focus away from the very real problems which pervade our multiple global cultures.

Nova: In your own artwork, how are you dealing with the concept of the "future of evolution" and memes — is it an area which interests you?

Josephine: Personally I am more interested in what is happening now, especially in regard to the fact that our experiences, especially in the western world, are becoming increasingly mediated by new technologies and the effects this is having on our lives.

Julianne: I think our work has always dealt with these areas, so all of a sudden we fit into the "memesis" framework. As visual artists we are particularly interested in interrogating how the future is perceived and created, and our work has dealt with how perceptions of the future [in turn] influence contemporary culture and thought. Personally, I am disturbed by nihilist and conservative projections of the future, and that the mapping of this terrain sets up expectations about how we will be living and interacting with our environment. I think that we need to perceive the future in multiple rather than mono possibilities, and that with the death of the

ideals of modernism, we are evolving towards pluralistic and diverse cultures. The current debates on "the future of evolution" seem to be mostly around the development of AI, robotics, emergent cultures etc. — how these are evolving and effect the evolutionary process. VNS Matrix are interested in these areas, but perhaps from a more radical position — we are outside of the academy and the big dollar world of AI R & D. We see ourselves more associated with the delinquent underground and formulate our position from this perspective.

Nova: VNS Matrix use low-end technologies to create their work, and combine several disciplines. In the current climate of obsession with high-end technologies such as robotics and artificial life, how do you feel your work fits into this milieu and do you still believe that concept is just as important [if not more than] the machine?

Josephine: VNS Matrix are best at making intelligent and critical vapourware, so we can use any high-end technology we want [hypothetically that is).

gashgirl: low-end/hi-end
concept
machine

Isn't this precisely the kind of reductionist binary paradigm we have been trying to shatter with our work? Sure, we use and advocate for the low end of tech, and that's partly a matter of choice, and also necessity. but which of us really wants to trade our power pc for the ghosts of earlier machines. There's no such thing as an exquisite CPU corpse. Beta is better than the devil you know.

If we were being completely honest — but let's not, it's more fun to lie. I think all cybersluts want to be driving the most powerful of machines possible. For about 10 years I've fantasised about the damage I could do during a residency at NASA. The bigger the boys the more insidious the toys and therefore the more you can fuck with both the machines and the systems which generate them.

Suck my code, General.

M'am, yes M'am!!

Boring binaries aside, it is more accurate to say that we work along and across various trajectories ... philosophical, political, creative, even spiritual ... choosing, stealing, tampering with the machines along the way.

As for artificial life, my low-end refrigerator is continually generating new forms. I never know what is going to emerge from that thing.

Nova: Finally, what are you currently working on and what are your plans for the "future"...

gashgirl: We have spent the past year creating a prototype for a real computer game called *Bad Code*. The core code has been fatally infected by the cyberfeminist meme and we disclaim any responsibility for the effects of this virus on those who will play our game. We now need to find an investor and/or multimedia publisher to enable this meme to expand and replicate. We'd like to see it on the shelves next to *Mortal Kombat*, *Cyst* and *Street Hooker III* next year.

VNS itself as an entity is morphing and bifurcating, creating new pathways of research and production. Shedding the collective exoskeleton which we had outgrown, the four minds are teleporting into parallel universes, where the memes of cyberfeminism have mutated into bizarre forms.

Josephine: We want to make theme parks on planets in distant galaxies!