Cyberfeminism Index: Noah's Archive of Cyberfeminist Art and Culture

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Abstract

This research examines the connection between cyberfeminism and the preservation and archiving of digital art. Utilizing Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) as a poetical framework, which suggests that the first tool created by humans was a basket, not a spear, the paper offers a speculative interpretation of the history of technology that emphasizes the significance of gathering and sharing over hunting and domination. The field of digital art is particularly susceptible to technological obsolescence, making collecting and preserving such work even more critical. The *Cyberfeminism Index* provides a valuable case study for tracing the genealogy of digital artifacts of cyberfeminist art from the 1990s and 2000s through collecting and curating them and ensuring their preservation for future generations. It is a web-based platform that facilitates the collection of digital art while also preserving the autonomy of each individual artifact and serves as an example of an archive that is imagined, organized, constructed, and maintained in a manner that aligns with cyberfeminist visions of building a feminist Internet. This study addresses the question of how to create more feminist archives and aims to explore the question of what to do with digital art that is already available online. By selecting, reinterpreting, and presenting existing digital art in new contexts, cyberfeminist artworks can be revitalized and given new meaning.

Keywords

Cyberfeminism Index, digital archives, preservation, cyberfeminist art, future-proofing, politics of care, hyperlinks, decentralization, non-hierarchical structure, feminist heritage.

Introduction

In her seminal essay "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), Ursula K. Le Guin posits that the first tool invented by humans was not the spear, as commonly believed, but rather the basket. [1] This theory is based on the idea that the ability to use containers to store fruits and vegetables collected from the natural environment was a fundamental predisposition for human development. This speculative reinterpretation of our history of technology highlights the importance of gathering and sharing rather than hunting and domination. In light of contemporary issues surrounding excessive production and exploitation of natural resources, this theory encourages us to consider the act of gathering with greater thoughtfulness and to question what we are collecting and why.

The field of digital art is particularly susceptible to obsolescence, making the preservation and archiving of such work all the more critical. Cyberfeminist art of the 1990s and 2000s provides a useful case study for tracing the genealogy of digital artifacts, collecting and curating them, and preserving them for posterity. One such archive that has taken on this endeavor is the *Cyberfeminism Index*, a web platform that facilitates the collection of digital art while also maintaining the autonomy of each individual artifact. The *Index* is imagined, organized, built, and maintained in an architecture that aligns with cyberfeminist visions of building a feminist Internet, a historical yet still relevant nuisance of the digital space.

This paper addresses how to create more feminist archives and aims to explore the question of what to do with digital art that is already available online. By examining the process of selecting, reinterpreting, and presenting existing digital art in new contexts, the paper demonstrates that this approach can revitalize the work and bring new meaning. The focus is on how to organize and facilitate the presentation of digital art that is already online and how this can be done in a way that is meaningful and impactful.

Context of Cyberfeminism

The Internet emerged in the early 1990s, and alongside its emergence came the concept of cyberfeminism. British philosopher Sadie Plant and the Australian art collective VNS Matrix developed the idea simultaneously yet independently. Initially, techno enthusiasts believed that the Internet would improve the quality of life and democratize access to knowledge. Based on the theoretical ideas of Donna Haraway's cyborg theory (1991), cyberfeminists hoped to create a radically feminist virtual space where they could be safe from sexism, harassment, and oppressive social arrangements. [2] Cyberfeminism was always playing with the idea of the future, radically imagining and building one, inspired by science fiction, fantasy landscapes, and human-machine hybridity in the virtual realm. They were inspired by female science fiction writers such as Octavia

Butler, who also envisioned a non-essentialist safe haven in cyberspace. However, cyberfeminist expectations from the Internet did not become a reality. The Internet ultimately proved to be a reflection of social conditions in the real world and has become a playground for (often misogynist and xenophobic) cyber violence, which can be even more severe online due to the anonymity of perpetrators.

Cyberfeminism brought feminisms and technology into a dialogue, a negotiation of how the world can be rebuilt and expanded as a counterpoint to values of patriarchal hegemony. According to Sofoulis (1998), "the question is not one of dominance and control, or of submission and surrender to machines; instead, it is one of exploring alliances, affinities, and possibilities…between women and technology." [3] Feminist artists saw much potential for collaboration and building a meeting space where they could develop an ideology of hyperlinking and connecting.

The internet-nascent art of the cyberfeminist movement has origins and continues to exist within the virtual realm of the World Wide Web. For net art, digital archives serve as their natural habitat and the only ecosystem in which they can be fully authentic, complex, and multidimensional. Archives possess an inherently political nature, as they involve decision-making processes (organizational, algorithmic, curatorial), reflect certain power relations, and serve as platforms for distributing cultural resources. This research attempts to identify an archive that subverts institutional hegemony by preserving the artwork's original context as defined by the artist. All projects on the *Index* are described in the words of the artists using original citations or quotes, in first voices, emphasizing the individualities
within cyberfeminism.

Facilitating as Curating, Curating as Archiving: Cyberfeminism Index

The *Cyberfeminism Index* is a digital archive that spans over three decades of new media and tactical art created by cyberfeminist artists from all inhabited continents. [4] The Index provides a comprehensive overview of the historical practice of cyberfeminism, which has been developing since the early stages of inhabiting the World Wide Web. The structure of the Index is a virtual carrier bag of hyperlinks that lead to sites that host cyberfeminist projects, historical and contemporary. It is designed as an intersection embedded with hyperlinks. The option is to convert digital artworks into physical objects by micro-curating and downloading a personal .pdf file. The architecture of the *Index* contributes to the decentralization of content and brings faithfulness to the original interpretation of projects. Since it does not appropriate any content, but instead directs toward it, it does not require legal ownership of the works. However, the format of an index also poses a weakness, as

websites are constantly changing and links can mutate or die. To address this issue, the *Cyberfeminism Index* replaces dead links with screenshots from the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. The *Index* is an organism with perpetual demand for maintenance, and as the facilitators profess, it is *INCOMPLETE and ALWAYS IN PROGRESS* [5].

Design and Aesthetic

To future-proof the *Index*, the least possible amount of extra tech was used, such as JavaScript for client-side and Python for server side. Accessibility was prioritized from the start, "so screen readers, alt text, closed captioning, and more, are built into the site's core rather than retrofitting it afterward. Accessibility is durability." Mehta (2018) points out that "in the context of hyper-connected data-driven societies – as cyborgs (networked individuals) in cyberspace (networked space) – archives are cybernetic containers of accessible, meta-tagged, cross-referenced, non-linear, transmedia data; observing systems that span several existing social and professional platforms to create a self-sustainable data multiverse." [6] All these attributes are a value system cyberfeminists wanted to unpack on.

The structure and design of the *Cyberfeminism Index* website is non-linear and non-hierarchical in nature. The website employs a minimalist aesthetic, utilizing default web elements and system font (Arial) to ensure that it remains functional even as its appearance changes due to software updates and other technological shifts. Navigation of the site is not limited to a single method, but rather offers multiple ways of searching and exploring. The design and functionality of the website are user-friendly, with simple fonts, colors, and a default black-and-white aesthetic that is activated by user interaction, revealing a green glow effect. The cursor is also designed to leave a visual trail while traversing through the *Index*. The website's design functions as a resource for defying digital obsolescence or future-proofing.

The aesthetic of the website is hardcoded, simple, and durable, characterized by no- or anti-aesthetics. The website's design was influenced by the *100 Anti-Theses* webpage by the Old Boys Network [7], a static website from 1997 that is still functioning over two decades later, and Alexei Shulgin's *Form Art*, an early net art piece from 1997 that utilizes HTML form elements without changing their default styling. [8] This intentional design that accommodates inevitable changes, akin to a website that designs itself over time, served as inspiration for the designers of the *Cyberfeminism Index*.

Structure and Politics

The *Cyberfeminism Index* is a socially engaged heritage practice that aims to revise Internet history through a cyberfeminist lens. It employs cybernetic principles such as

feedback and self-organization, which have been employed in writings on media, from Marshall McLuhan and the video movement in the 1960s and 1970s to the cyberpunk fiction and cyberspace texts of the following decades. The Index tells a different story of the Internet through the lens of its makers, and the multiplicities of cyberfeminism are emphasized through original citations and quotes. One of the fundamental ideological principles of the Index is its emphasis on transparency. All of the structural tables, data, HTML code, and Google Spreadsheets are made publicly available online on the facilitators' personal website. This gathering and democratization of knowledge serves as a tool for survival in the future, and is a political act in itself. As Paul (2007) asserts, "the hidden or protected back-end of any project - be it a database or code - always makes an inherently political statement about access and its control, which is perfectly captured by the implications of client-server relationships. [9] In this context, adopting a peer-to-peer approach instead of a client-server relationship becomes both a philosophical and a political issue, as it holds the potential for liberation from centralized servers.

The Ideology behind the *Cyberfeminism Index* is embodied in the theory of hyperlinks. The facilitator of the Index was inspired by the book *Writing Machines* by Anne Catherine Hayles [10] and *Politics of Citation* by Sal Hamerman. The term "hyperlink" was coined in 1965 by Ted Nelson and his assistant Calvin Curtin at the start of Project Xanadu (proto-internet) as a more horizontal and collaborative, decentralized dispersion of power, challenging conventional data structures and vertical hierarchies. The theory of hyperlinks is about relational organization, it is anti-hegemonic, posing a dialectic of different opinions and interpretations. This technical solution implemented in the *Index* is rooted in feminist theory emphasizing connectivity and collaboration, as embodied in a quote by a pioneer net artist Olia Lialina: "All you need is link." [11] The *Index* relies on hyperlinks and collaborative editing and crowdsourcing for its compilation, preservation and longevity.

Curatorial approach: Who is the Noah of the Arc

The *Cyberfeminism Index* utilizes a unique approach to the selection and organization of its content, referred to as "gathering" or "facilitating" rather than "curating." This approach emphasizes the avoidance of creating hierarchies and instead focuses on building relational ethics through the act of webbing, or constructing a structure akin to a spider web.

The curatorial politics of the Index are based on the principles of open-source, and its intended target audience is inclusive of all Web users, rather than being limited to the art community or academics. The *Index* is in line with the

original cyberfeminists' ideals of connectivity and collaboration, as it employs citational logic, hypertext, and footnotes in its construction. The website utilizes a radically non-linear logic, with no pre-assigned hierarchy, which promotes intuitive exploration and individual content curation.

The content on the *Index* is divided into two main categories: "YACK" and "HACK." The distinction between these two categories refers to theory and practice respectively. The website's drop-down menu is further divided into five sections: Cyberfeminism Index, About, Images, Collections, and Search. A unique feature of the *Index* is the option for users to navigate their search by browsing only images, without accompanying text, providing a nostalgic and visually-based approach to exploring the genre of cyberfeminism.

The *Cyberfeminism Index* currently features around 800 projects, which were crowdsourced or sourced from cyberfeminist art anthologies. Among these projects, 13 contributors, including cyberfeminist artists, writers, and activists such as Legacy Russell, Melanie Hoff, and VNS Matrix, curated their own collections. The *Index* will continue to operate under the post-custodial stewardship of the founder Mindy Seu and other community members, remaining open for submissions and collaboration in the future.

Conclusion

The Cyberfeminism Index serves as a valuable example for future forms of organization in digital archives. Its approach to incorporating a cyberfeminist perspective on technology while also considering the platform's sustainability and adaptability for the future illustrates the significance of considering politics in the management of knowledge infrastructure. The use of original citations and quotes from the artists themselves, along with the option for users to download content, emphasizes the importance of decentralization and resistance against the hegemony of knowledge.

Furthermore, the use of Google Spreadsheets as a structural tool highlights the potential for technological tools to be used in a decentralized and non-hierarchical manner, a philosophy that can be applied to future politics of multi-dimensional virtual spaces. The *Index* serves as a model for a feminist approach to archiving, enabling cultural resistance and connectivity through data and content curation.

An identified unfavorable aspect of the *Index* lies in the potential for the obsolescence of particular links, which poses a threat to the continued preservation and accessibility of various artworks. However, even in a state of dormancy, these links serve as important historical documents that witness to the existence of these works. They offer invaluable resources for researchers to scrutinize, as well as provide an

opportunity for contributors to revitalize their content once these links are restored. Additionally, future scholars may reference these documents as evidence of the existence of these artworks in times past. Some of the potential solutions lies in the InterPlanetary File System and blockchain technology. Further research would open space for their implementation in archiving and preservation.

The works featured on the *Index* represent radical techno-critical activism that shapes a cyberfeminist counter-public. It is important to consider how the content and organization of such archives will evolve over time and how heritage is performed within it.

The *Cyberfeminism Index* serves as an example of how an archive can act both as a portal and a container, with curated items coming together to create a multiverse, while also transporting users into the world of cyberfeminists. The ongoing test of time for such archives is how the content and organization evolve, how space is negotiated, and how heritage is performed within it.

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Author's Biography

Andrea Tešanović is a producer, artist, and researcher with a multi-disciplinary background in media art, cultural management, and feminist activism. Her cultural and artistic practices emphasize the merging of disciplines and challenge dominant patriarchal power structures. Her practice encompasses various topics, including video art, media art management, and curating. As a researcher, her work is unpacking the transdisciplinary intersection between art and science, unraveling biotechnology and synthetic biology in media art, feminist critical theory, and robotics. In recent years, Tešanović has been involved in producing festivals, exhibitions, and performances across Europe and the Balkans.