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GENDER JAMMING. Or: Yes, We Are.

Culture Jamming and Feminism

Verena Kuni

“We’re Not Feminists” (Lasn 1999)

Imagine: A video. A man in his kitchen, being interviewed. He’s showing us a jar with jam: “My breakfast consists of a slice of bread, butter, and cyberfeminist marmalade. That’s how I connect art and life.” However, if this is the answer, what was the question?

Imagine: A billboard poster. A woman reclined. She’s naked. Very reminiscent of well-known paintings, female nudes from art history. However, why is her face covered by a gorilla mask?

Imagine: A magazine ad. A model posing with a cigarette. Young, attractive, her eyes meeting ours with a perky look. However, is this really – as the text of the advertisement tells us – Ljubica Gerovac, the Yugoslavian revolutionary heroine?

We will come back to the magazine ad, the billboard poster, the video later – and of course to the questions as well. But first of all, let us start with jam.

1 Why Jam – And What Is It Good For

If we want to think about “Culture Jamming and Feminism”, we must indeed first of all take a closer look at what “culture jamming” means, and how culture jamming works. The term “culture jamming” is generally associated with strategies, tactics and practices directed at the dominant politics of representation, in order to subvert and thereby fight the latter. More specifically, it is often used to denote anti-consumerist and/or anti-corporate critical action against advertisements in mass media and public spaces. Both the closer and the broader definition may already seem quite appropriate for bringing feminist critique into practice: Not only have practices – as well as theoretical reflexions – directed at the dominant politics of representation always played a considerable role in feminism, from its early beginnings up until today; we may also assume that, within this framework, critical involvement with commercial imagery in general and especially with advertisements should have its stance as well.

So how come we have to read from a guy named Kalle Lasn that culture jammers are “not feminists”?

To answer this question, it makes sense to dig a little deeper: to further trace back the history of the term and its interpretations. While Kalle Lasn’s book *Culture Jam*, published in 1999, may have contributed to make culture jamming – both the term and practices it represents – even more prominent in today’s media and pop culture, its first accounts go back to the 1980s, or more precisely: to a record released in 1985 by the U. S. band Negativland. A major part of the release, titled *JamCon ’84*, is devoted to interviews and recordings from the titular “Jammer Convention”, and the term is not only dropped in the audio itself, but also featured in the second track, “Crosley Bendix Reviews JamArt and Cultural Jamming” (Negativland 1985). Negativland, which began as an experimental band working with sounds appropriated from different sources – in its early years, to a considerable amount from radio broadcasts – and, together with live performances, also producing its own related radio broadcasts, had drawn the term from an “info-war” practice known as “radio jamming”: a technique for disturbing transmissions from undesired sources, i. e. “enemy stations” or political opponents.

Of course at that time the very practices coined with “culture jamming” had neither been limited to audio, nor were they generally unknown. Strategies and techniques of “mixing original materials . . . with things taken from corporately owned mass culture and the world around” (Negativland 2012) can be easily traced back to the beginnings of early corporate capitalism and early popular mass media culture. Among the more prominent examples are pieces by artists affiliated with the Dada movement (i. e. Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters) or political photo-montages like those John Heartfield created for the *Arbeiter Internationale Zeitung*, as well as many of the media productions of the Situationist International, and for the following period from the late 1960s onwards, we can point to activists and groups later subsumed under umbrella terms like “Yippies” (Hofmann 1980; Krassner 2003), “Kommunikationsguerilla” (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe, Blissett and Brünzels 1997), and others.

Seen from this background, we may rightly ask what led to the new career of both the term and the related practices in the late 1990s up until today. Obviously Kalle Lasn’s book has contributed to this career – yet it would be naive to think of it as a main cause. Rather, we will have to look at developments in the economical, technological and socio-political field: Not only had this period seen a rise in what is usually subsumed under the umbrella term “globalization” – the expansive strategies of corporate capitalism fuelled for example by the fall of Soviet Union and other political transformations in communist and now post-communist countries – but also the rise of digital media and information network technologies. In fact, the latter particularly contributed in many ways to bringing a good amount of both the tools and the materials decisive for contemporary practices of culture jamming to those involved.

2 The F-word, Again

Indeed, Lasn too was looking back rather than forward when he published his book *Culture Jam* in 1999, which is to a large extent based upon his own experiences as a communication designer and creative director having undergone a Saul-to-Paul transformation, leaving the corporate market to found his own “culture jamming agency”, the now-famous *Adbusters* magazine. Together with a more general definition of culture jamming, the first paragraphs introduce the imaginary community of culture jammers as a “diverse tribe” consisting of

“born-again Lefties to Green entrepreneurs to fundamentalist Christians who don’t like what television is doing to their kids; from punk anarchists to communications professors to advertising executives searching for a new role in life. Many of us are longtime activists who in the midst of our best efforts suddenly felt spiritually winded. For us feminism had run out of steam, the environmental movement no longer excited, the fire no longer burned in the belly of the Left, and youth rebellion was looking more and more like an empty gesture inspired by Nike. We were losing.” (Lasn 1999: xii)

The statement – mainly conceived as a background to let the light of culture jamming shine even brighter (“Then we had an idea”) – contains already much of what we’ll later be confronted with whenever Lasn mentions the f-word. While the eager reader will also find an acknowledgement of the merits of 1970s feminism, this is only the reverse side of the very same coin: for Lasn, feminism is something outdated – an attitude to be overcome if we seriously want to look towards positive future perspectives. The smart cultural jammer is already ahead in terms of socio-political consciousness as well as in creating more appropriate tools for fighting the “real enemy”, global corporate capitalism.

Yet, there is one notable exception Lasn is mentioning in the very chapter starting with the already quoted bland statement, “we’re not feminists” (Lasn 1999: 117) – which is for reasons to which we shall come back later also worth mentioning here: the “insightful audacity of a few eco- and cyberfeminists – Suzi Gablik, Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant among them” (Lasn 1999: 117–18). It may be added that this is perhaps also because his writings seem to owe more than the author may admit to these three.

However, when digging his book for related perspectives brought into practice, our basket will remain empty. Neither the case studies nor the *Adbusters* campaigns introduced give any hint of a conscious acknowledgement of gender-sensitive issues or strategies for fighting for example ongoing sexism in marketing and advertisements.

Bad enough perhaps, but it gets even worse. For while we may or may not consider Lasn’s book as a reliable source, we can hardly ignore that it is kind of representative indeed of most of the prominent resources usually recommended to those interested in the field. This includes some of the more prominent books dealing with similar matters and looking at strategies of resistance against global brands – such as Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*

(2000), Paul Kingsnorth's *One No, Many Yeses* (2004), or Matt Mason's *The Pirate's Dilemma. How Youth Culture is Reinventing Capitalism* (2008), in none of which can we find "feminism", "feminist" or "gender" as issues worth mentioning in the index. Which does not necessarily mean feminism and gender would remain untouched throughout; however, they are not closely examined as forces of cultural jamming practice. Also tracing several of the prominent websites and blogs featuring news about and examples of cultural jamming – i. e. *Rebel Art* or *Wooster Collective* – will likewise lead to poor results: "feminism", "feminist" or "gender" are not to be found in the tag list, so to speak.

Yet, as so often, it would be wrong to conclude from these prominent publications that gender issues are not on cultural jammer's agendas, or that there is no feminism in cultural jamming. What remains invisible is not necessarily "not there".

3 Why Have There Been No Great Feminist Culture Jammers?

A rhetorical question, of course, because there have been, and there are quite a few examples worth mentioning here. Nevertheless, the question is chosen not only to kick the indeed somewhat strange ignorance of gender issues in the sourcebooks and sites mentioned above in the ass, but also to point out there are structural reasons for the later, which are at least partially similar to those discussed by feminist art historians like Linda Nochlin, and others (Nochlin 1971; Jones 2003). At the same time, it should also be acknowledged that in the case of culture jamming there is another, more general reason why heroes and heroines alike are difficult to be tracked and listed in books: first of all, many of the practices and actions are, at least in part, illegal – and thus it is not really adequate to carry them out under one's real name, for simple reasons of unnecessary personal risk. Secondly, a critique against the politics of branding and labelling can for good reasons also include "personal brands", heroism and the sanctuaries of authorship.

However, if we want to put some meat on the bones, it is of course possible to mention exemplary positions and examples of culture jamming that can be rightly coined as feminist – and, at the same time, also to point at publications dealing with issues of culture jamming and hereby including feminism in their discussion as well, like Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's generally recommendable book *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (2004). Plus, there are also other sources, such as zines, webzines and blogs, usually run by groups or individuals affiliated and/or sympathizing with feminist ideas, where examples of feminist culture jamming may pop up from time to time. And last but not least, there are also a few websites with related information about artists and groups who might indeed be related to the fem jam we're looking for.

But before going into details, we should perhaps first ask for criteria: what would we expect from a project to be subsumed under a category such as “feminist culture jamming”?

While a focus on critical action against misogynist advertisements in mass media and public spaces may be a precise match, we might claim that – seen from a feminist standpoint – it would be all too narrow as well. This is for the very reasons that feminist critique of visual culture and predominant politics of representation (Jones 2003) has shown: misogynous, derogative or “simply” misleading politics of representation and perception are generally woven so neatly into the texture of our culture that fighting against the obvious can only be one issue among others. Thus when watching out for feminist cultural jamming we will also have to include projects and strategies directed toward other areas of visual culture and other aspects of politics of representation as well.

Considering this broader scope the probability of encountering artistic projects is likely to rise: Together with art directors and other creative professionals working inside the visual and media industries, artists are certainly among the best educated and are prepared not only to analyze existing visual languages, but also to bring adequate strategies of critique into visual and media practice. In contrast to the former, who are likely to work for corporate clients rather than to start campaigns biting the hands that feed them, the latter are perhaps more likely to get involved into critical engagement – simply because the ideology of (post-)modern art includes the expectation of artists-as-critics and thus usually rewards a related attitude, at least when kept within the framework of what society usually would accept as “art.” Plus (and also for the last reason) we will usually get to know simpler and more reliable information about artistic interventions, for these are more likely to be covered by the media in a professional way – and in contrast to activist’s interventions, they are also in the majority of cases connectable to a real person with a real name.

If this applies to cultural jamming projects (and their authors) in general, it is even more important when it comes to feminist culture jamming, because of its generally low visibility in public media, for the very reasons stated above. At the same time, we should not feel tempted to shift our attention from feminist critique to female actors – not every person of female gender (and/or sex) engaged in culture jamming is necessarily into feminist culture jamming. Likewise, not every action dealing with representational critique – and again this is true for representational critique in general as well as for feminist representational critique – should be automatically dubbed “culture jamming”. Rather, one will have to decide from case to case.

4 Fem Jam, Getting a Taste of

This being said, it may be the right time to take a look at some of the very few practical examples. If advertisements on billboards or posters in public spaces, in magazines, and in other media from TV to the internet, global

acting corporate companies and major brand could be considered as core targets of culture jamming, keeping these targets in focus will of course be most appropriate. However, as argued above, widening the angle from time to time should be allowed as well.

Thus, why not start with the images we invited to imagine in the first paragraphs of our text – like the magazine ad, showing a young, attractive model posing with a cigarette? As soon as we translate the text lines accompanying the picture translated, we will realize there's been a shift. Otherwise we might ask our preferred search engine about the name Ljubica Gerovac. We learn from the text, however, that Gerovac was “charged with anti-fascist activities. Committed suicide while being arrested. Died at the age of 22.” The piece is part of a series of similar “ads” launched in magazines, each combining the reproduction of a top-model shot with the dry record of Yugoslavian women who were active in the anti-fascist movement and killed, died or held in prison and who later become recognized as heroines in communist times. The name is not only placed where in the original ad the brand's name would appear, but also set in the appropriate typeface (Eiblmayr 2001).

When the Croatian artist Sanja Ivećović published her series *Gen XX* (1997) for the first time, she could be sure that the ex-Yugoslavian public would recognize both the models (all of them at that time appearing often in fashion magazines) and the names (all of them known as national heroines, closely associated with the country's communist past). However, due to the aesthetic strategy chosen, the intended shift can be easily understood by nearly anyone familiar with the visual language of fashion advertisements – indeed, it is also reported that the fashion industry itself reacted against what was initially perceived as appropriation by a Croatian “concurrent agency”. Even if we consider the latter is obviously a misinterpretation failing the main intention of the artist, it may still prove the visual reading of the series as an example of successful culture jamming. It might be added that Ivećović is not the only artist from the former Yugoslavia making use of related strategies and producing works that can be aptly read under the auspices of culture jamming. Serbian artist Milica Tomic, for example, placed manipulated photos showing her in attractive clothes and make-up on the covers of glossy magazines. Only a closer look at the details will reveal she was not standing under a lamppost, but hanging from it, just as members of the anti-fascist resistance who were hung in public spaces in the 1940s (*Belgrade Remembers* 2001). Indeed, the work is not only considered to be a memory of German soldiers' cruelties, but also of Belgrade's citizens who would try to ignore these in order to proceed with their daily lives (Stokić 2006). Yet if we're looking for a clear feminist standpoint, Ivećović – who already in 1975 produced a series based on appropriated magazine ads, in this case juxtaposed with private photographs of herself sporting the same poses, and presented as unconscious mimicking of a set of learned (female) behaviour rather than as a conscious re-enactment of role models – is sincerely among those literally standing in.

From here let us switch to the next image we were invited to imagine: the billboard poster showing a reclined nude with a gorilla mask. In this case, the rather dreadful animal's head combined with what seems to be a scene all too familiar from art history – an educated visual memory will even identify the famous source, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Grand Odalisque* (1814) – is rightly pointing us to a critical reading. The same goes for the text, with its bold black and pink letters on the poster's yellow background yelling at our eyes the question: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met.Museum?" Below what can be read as a telling answer: "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female" – accomplished with the signature: "Guerrilla Girls. Conscience of the Art World" (Guerrilla Girls 1995). The precision of the piece may be debatable (Ingres' *Odalisque* is not in the Met's collection, but is owned by the Louvre; the quota may be put in doubt for it is relating of a portion of the artworks – those depicting nudes – with the sex of the artists), yet both the juxtaposition and the strong visual rhetoric are convincing. The language is for sure not sublime, but we get the message – and that's what is important here. Plus the piece has its own precision indeed, considering the fact that art museums themselves actively use very similar marketing strategies to advertise their collections and their blockbuster exhibitions, and the agencies handling this are indeed likely to propose (and realize) campaigns building upon the very mechanisms proven to be successful in consumer ads. This means that "attractive women" and female nudes are, if appropriate, among the favoured motifs – and if it's too risky to choose a photo work from the contemporary collection, the "cultured nudity" of historical paintings is always a good solution. While the billboard poster is not sincerely in the first instance a jam of museum marketing campaigns, its impact can be rightly read as hitting this target as well. Yet it is likewise fine to stay with the basic intentions of the piece: today's large museums are – in certain parts even literally – global brands, and so is the system behind it as well as its main product: the traditional concept of Western art history, including an implicit or even explicit misogyny that is still part of its "big sells" in our consumerist culture.

5 FF: Gender Jamming. Another turn of the screw

If both the magazine ad and the billboard poster turned out to be almost classical examples from the history of feminist culture jamming, then what about the video clip?

At least at a first glance, it seems likewise to operate within the familiar framework of appropriating the language and the media of commercial advertising – in this case of TV ads for household consumer products and food. The latter being presented by a male actor is not at all unusual, at least whenever it's about dairy products, cereals, jam and other breakfast food that does not need to be prepared in any complicated manner but is simply



*Cornelia Sollfrank:
Cyberfeminist Jam (1999)*

A verbatim example of a cyberfeminist jam, featured in Sollfrank's video clip from the same year. It is disguised insofar as the video's English subtitles translating the German "Cyberfeministische Marmelade" into "cyberfeminist marmalade" are somewhat misleading – for in the jar and on the bread is tasty raspberry-redcurrant spread.

eaten (which does not necessarily mean a presumed gender equality among target customers – rather, it would tell the housewife buying the jam and serving it will make the husband and herself happy without any additional efforts needed, and the single male, just as the exceptional 'houseman', will know the same will apply to himself as well).

However, listening to the guy telling us about his breakfast consisting "of a slice of bread, butter, and cyberfeminist marmalade" should make us wonder, shouldn't it? Has feminism – or a particular kind of feminism with a strange appendix – become consumable and even tasty for men? Something to enjoy and, at least in this case, something capable of reconciling "art and life"?

Indeed, we may rightly ask about the very special brand he is marketing here. The answer is of course in the jam – or maybe more precisely, it's the cyberfeminist ingredients that make the jam special.

As it turns out, the clip is just an excerpt of a longer piece featuring statements from a variety of people of different ages, genders and nationalities, all answering a question posed by the author of the clip: "How has cyberfeminism changed your life?" The answers to this question are generally positive (except for one, a "... dunno ... has not really changed anything ..."), and the interviewees all seem to be serious – only that in the majority of cases their answers point to results sounding somewhat absurd. Thus, if we consider the clip as an advertisement for cyberfeminism, we might wonder even more.

The solution to this riddle is still to be found in the jam – and of course in the special brand combining feminism with its strange appendix. Yet perhaps this is not exactly the way Kalle Lasn would have put it, claim-

ing instead that cyberfeminists (together with eco-feminists) could refresh the “old feminism” he preferred to sneeze at (in contrast to his positively mentioned authorities by the way, none of whom has ever dropped arguments against feminism – rather all of them relate to “old feminism(s)” as something that laid the groundwork for further developments).

When Cornelia Sollfrank produced the clip in 1999 to become part of a small series of media productions to bring the message of cyberfeminist diversity to the people, cyberfeminism itself had already a history – and consisted of a network of people (indeed of different age, gender, nationality and profession) including a far broader variety of positions than those of the two authors mentioned by Lasn, Donna Haraway (coined as cyberfeminist for her famous “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” 1989/1991) and Sadie Plant (who coined the term cyberfeminist in her book *zeros + ones*, 1997).

Accordingly, a broad variety of approaches and methods had been brought into theory and practice – among these those favoured by the members of the Old Boys Network, “the first cyberfeminist international”, of which Sollfrank was a founding member (OBN 1998; 1999; 2002). Indeed, already the name (Old Boys Network) and one of its first manifestations, the *100 anti-theses* published on the occasion of the First Cyberfeminist International Conference that took place in the context of *documenta X* in Kassel, can provide a hint to its relation with feminist culture jamming: first, the programmatic appropriating and queering of the name, traditional format and strategy of old boys’ networks (usually known for their implicit and/or explicit misogyny). Second, there is the appropriation and queering of one of the most prominent formats of the political and artistic movement’s public manifestations, the manifesto. While an example the latter, the *100 anti-theses* explicitly avoids any serious definition of cyberfeminism(s) in order to list one hundred statements about what cyberfeminism is not (from “1. cyberfeminism is not a fragrance”, through “7. cyberfeminism ist kein gruenes haekeldeckchen”, “20. sajbrfeminizm nige nesto sto znam da je”, and “65. cyberfeminismo no es una banana”, to “100. cyberfeminism has not only one language”; OBN 1997), thus pointing to the necessity of diversity and difference. The Old Boys Network has tried to develop methods and formats to bring this idea of diversity and difference into practice within the framework of a society in transformation under the impact of digital network technologies and media (including problems and potentials), and by using as well as reflecting digital network technologies and media.

But how far may we speak of “gender jamming”, as the title of this chapter would suggest, as a further development or “turn-of-the-screw(s)” of feminist culture jamming? More generally, we should assume gender jamming to slightly shift the perspective of both target(s) and strategies not only by looking at the multiple relationships between (the politics of) sex(ing) and gender(ing) – for these are on the feminist agenda, and are thus also on the agenda of feminist cultural jamming already. Rather, we will think of perspectives more specifically brought in by and with the more

recent developments of gender studies, queer studies and “post-gender studies” (the latter related to what has been coined as “postgenderism”, yet not necessarily identifying with a trans-humanist position, as claimed for example by Dvorsky and Hughes 2008).

More specifically, however, at least the gender jamming brought into practice by the Old Boys Network and its members for good purposes built upon feminist culture jamming to implement another turn of the screw indeed. While rejecting (and jamming) the high expectations against cyberfeminism as a theory, practice and “high art” of transforming feminism into a cultured consumable for a post-feminist digerati generation, at the same time gender issues were addressed in an unmistakable openness towards people of all genders, but with one rule clearly defined: everybody could become a member of OBN and take part in the network, as long as s/he calls herself a woman (“bearded or not”, her sex, sexual preferences, etc., notwithstanding; see i. e. Kuni 2003). Which is, to sum up the jam, not just another example for feminist cultural jamming or cyberfeminist gender jamming, but should be one of the (if not “the”) most important ingredients for any kind of feminist culture’n’gender jam.

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Adbusters

<http://www.adbusters.org>

Bitch Magazine

<http://bitchmagazine.org>

Culture Jam (The Film)

<http://www.culturejamthefilm.com>

Culture Jamming

<http://www.culture-jamming.de>

Grassroots Feminism

<http://www.grassrootsfeminism.net>

Grrrl Zine Network

<http://grrrlzines.net>

Guerrilla Girls

<http://www.guerrillagirls.com>

Jammin' Ladies

<http://jamming.wordpress.com>

Negativland

<http://www.negativland.com>

Old Boys Network

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Rebel:Art

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* Accessed 12 February 2012