

Rebecca Ardner

Critique Matters

2015

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3833>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ardner, Rebecca: Critique Matters. In: *spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures*, Jg. 2 (2015), S. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3833>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

https://spheres-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/spheres-2_Ardner.pdf

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

REBECCA ARDNER

CRITIQUE MATTERS

Commenting on a performance appears to be difficult without referring to the form and kind of art that is expressed. Still, I think it is possible to deal with this performance by approaching the question of what kind of critique is embedded and expressed in it.

The purpose of my text is therefore not an explicit interpretation of the forms of quasi-lyric expressions (e.g. “Part parting partying monster”) in spoken word performances,¹ but to highlight that politics matters in and for the performance. This is not only due to the fact that Da Rimini/Doll Yoko and Barratt are both part of cyberfeminist activism. Their key role in the development of cyberfeminism e.g. as members of VNS-Matrix, the influential group of media artists that tried to remap cyberculture in a feminist way in the 1990s, certainly illustrates the political and critical dimension. Da Rimini and Barratt interfere with society by means of Internet and multimedia projects that offer anti-spaces and alternative identities via avatars, such as Gashgirl or Doll Yoko, or games such as All New Gen, to mention just a few examples.

In addition to this reference to critique rooted in the context and surrounding of Da Rimini and Barratt, I would also claim that the content of the performance itself is interwoven with and characterized by critique. In order to reconstruct the kind of critique that is put forward by the performance, I will address three aspects.

Firstly, I will approach the text as a possible answer to the problem that the optimistic, emancipatory promises made by cyberfeminism

1 In this regard, I was only able to observe that Barratt and Da Rimini/Doll Yoko often use terms and neologisms (e.g. “bitchcoin” and “glitchcoin” instead of “bitcoin” (p. 4)) in a staccato and clipped way. As a result, one could say that they perform some kind of technological- or machine-language. In line with the leitmotif of hexing, the performance itself functions like a hex.

have not been fulfilled. Secondly, the review of the history of cyberfeminism included in the performance, depicts a form of critical self-reflection and could be interpreted as a reaction to the allegation that cyberfeminism has neglected – and still neglects – history and only focuses on discursive practices. The third aspect refers to the three new borgs that were presented in the performance as an actualization of concepts of resistance. By stressing that these borgs have been developed as a reaction towards the transition of forms of societies, it is possible to ask the follow-up question of how resistance and critique are conceptualized in this proposal.

What kind of critique does the performance propose and what kind of critique does it imply? Trying to answer these questions means to identify and discuss the kinds of critique involved, and it only makes sense if one operates on the assumption that politics and critique matter.

CYBERFEMINISM'S UNFULFILLED PROMISES

The first point is that the performance can be interpreted as a reaction to the fact that the promises made by cyberfeminism have not been fulfilled. To address this topic in more detail, we first need to consider what exactly was promised and by whom.

As for many other activists and theorists, Donna Haraway's work serves as a central point of reference for Da Rimini and Barratt. Her *Cyborg Manifesto* is the first thing they mention and they explicitly state: "Donna Haraway was our guide and we took her at her word". For this reason, it seems useful to discuss the promises made by Haraway.

According to Haraway, the cyborg, as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"² is the adequate figure of resistance in technoscience or times of "informatics of domination"³. First of all, there is the analysis of contemporary social systems, a kind of analysis of the present, with a characteristic blurring of crucial boundaries (mainly between human and animal, between anti-human (organism) and machine and, lastly, between physical and non-physical)⁴. Secondly, the cyborg is the figure that fits these circumstances. In fact, there is no alternative but to accept the challenge and deal with such a figuration. "By the late twentieth century, [...] we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our

2 Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", *The Haraway Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 7–46, p. 7.

3 Cp. *ibid.* 20ff.

4 Cp. *ibid.* 10ff.

ontology; it gives us our politics”⁵. My point here is that on the one hand the cyborg is reactive as it can be described as an answer to new forms of society. On the other hand, it is active in so far as it is a figure of resistance, a powerful answer and an essential tool in the fight against the male-dominated technoculture.

This is a connecting point to the cyberfeminism discourse, which pursues the objective of adopting technology for feminist actions and theories as well. This approach can also be identified in the performance.

“[...] the Cunt Intelligence Agency (CIA), [as a cyberfeminist form of intervention, R.A.] was on a mission to emancipate zeros and ones from clutches of infocapital’s data miners, unleashing a feminist toxoplasmosis of rage into the masculinist datascape.”

The problem is that such a strategy of appropriation sometimes tends to overemphasize the subversive potential of figures such as the cyborg, and as a result, Haraway and her cyborg figure in particular are often interpreted as techno-euphemisms, an approach that whitewashes the destructive potential of technology.

In light of this allegation, I would like to argue that Haraway herself conceptualizes the cyborg as a constitutively ambivalent figure.

“From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of the defense, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point”⁶.

The second perspective illustrates the emphasis put on the emancipatory potentials of transgression and displacement, e.g. understanding cyborg identity as a possibility to create a post-gender identification. Following this reasoning, moments of deviance could turn into moments of subversion and emancipation. Despite the cyborg’s well-known reputation as a symbol of empowerment, it is crucial to highlight that this is not an innocent practice, as the first

5 Ibid. 8.

6 Ibid. 13.

perspective in the quotation shows. Haraway expatiates this aspect several times⁷ and substantiates it: “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism”⁸. In order to clarify this reference, it seems useful to look into the origin of the term ‘cyborg’. It was first used by the scientists Nathan Kline and Manfred Clynes, who conducted research on adapting the human body for space travel at Rockland State Hospital, New York, and who tried to design a self-regulating man-machine-system.⁹ In addition to these powerful research activities, Peter Galison insists on the history of war and violence that influences the cybernetic discourse of cyborgs.¹⁰ This aspect of blameworthiness also comes to light in the performance: “This was dirty work, re-engineering the masc-code of militarism and patri-capitalism through shuddering, spasming somatic networked affective immaterialities.”

In summary, the cyborg as an effect and a symptom of the *informatics of domination* is quite an ambivalent figure. On the one hand, the figure is a tool for release, emancipation and resistance, and on the other, it emerges from capitalism and technoscience and, as their offspring, the cyborg is directly connected to these structures.

One of the most important aspects of cyberfeminism, however, was the promise of emancipatory potential opened up by a figure such as the cyborg. Even though Haraway’s promises were never as clear-cut as they were interpreted, it needs to be noted that the current situation is characterized by finding a way to deal with the fact that these promises have not been fulfilled. An updated analysis of the present must reflect that cyberfeminism’s attempt at appropriating and utilizing technology for feminist purposes did not pave the way for a more liberated society. In fact, we are even more oppressed by technology in some respects. Instead of creating a digital post-gender world, we find that gender dichotomies are amplified through social media etc. and living in the

7 Cp. *ibid.* 9, 38.

8 *Ibid.* 10.

9 Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, “Cyborgs and Space”, in *The Cyborg Handbook*, 1995 [1960], pp. 29–35.

10 Cp. Peter Galison, “The Ontology of the Enemy”, in *Critical Inquiry*, 1994, pp. 228–266. Galison criticizes Haraway, who indeed refers to these origins but finally contradicts: „But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (Haraway “A Manifesto for Cyborgs Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, 10). Galison critically asks: „Can the cybernetic vision be so easily detached from its military historical origins and present location? [...] I would argue that the associations of cybernetics (and the cyborg) with weapons, oppositional tactics, and the black-box conception of human nature do not so simply melt away” (Galison “The Ontology of the Enemy”, 260). One might argue that Haraway generally does not tend to separate existing connections to military origins. Rather, her conception shifts from the explicit problematization of military contexts to the strategy of appropriation.

Internet is not able to stop discrimination based on some old-fashioned notions of identity, such as race or gender.

To some extent, these developments can be explained by the fact that capitalism has managed to develop strategies for appropriating approaches that are inherently characterized by resistance for its own purposes. The performance also makes reference to such movements that strip creative cyberfeminism of its potential of resistance and obfuscate cyberpunk's early enthusiasm for technology.

It is obvious that there is a problem that calls for action. The performance can thus be seen as an attempt to deal with the problem of cyberfeminism's unfulfilled promises¹¹ and it does this in at least two ways: On the one hand, by adopting a self-reflective perspective on the history of cyberfeminism, which might be able to offer an explanation; and on the other, by proposing to reconfigure cyborg feminism to form a movement that is capable of articulating new and current figures of resistance.

HISTORY AND MATTER HAVE MATTERED AND STILL DO IN CYBERFEMINISM

After embedding the performance in a wider context, I will now move on to refer to the text itself in more detail. The self-reflective perspective on the history of cyberfeminism could be explained by the fact that the reinterpretation of its history is an important part of the performance. In light of this, the "Daughters of Fury, the speculative wings of cyberfeminism" start a dialogue with different figures of resistance that emerge from cyberfeminism, such as the Hexexecutable, and reflect on how they functioned and what could have been the other potential options for implementing emancipative political interventions. For example, instead of the development that the "Hexexecutable runs Napoleon", the Daughters of Fury claim "we must 'come to our senses' [...] restore magics to the land and the body and hex Capital", and thus suggest another concept of resistance. Aside from the fact that the reinterpretation also includes amendments to the history, history in itself also plays an important role. As a whole, the performance gives an overview of the development of cyberfeminism: From the *Cyberfeminist Manifest for the 21st Century*, considered as the starting point of the strategy of appropriation, the "hyperstitional attack on the gendered regime of technological gatekeeping", via the problematization by liberal cyberfeminism, which criticizes "radical cyberfeminism for being

¹¹ Another contemporary attempt to deal with this problem is for example Xenofeminism from Laboria Cuboniks.

privileged, essentialist, binary, reductive and not sufficiently intersectional”, to the “jubilant well-post-punk period”. Possibilities for building a new political subject after the re-appropriation of cyberpunk-strategies by the Capital are also discussed. The reinterpretation of cyberfeminism shows that history matters, not because of the plain fact that history is told, but more precisely because of the Furies’ critical interventions.

Another aspect that shows that history matters in and for the performance is in regard to the examination of postfordism, the “Informational Capitalism” that “has constructed [...] the contemporary form of slavery” and in which chain workers, care workers, code workers and sex workers are analogized. This issue shows that it is important to keep the specific functionalities of capitalism in mind. The specification also refers to feminist topics, such as the topics of “the homework economy” and the role of “women in the integrated circuit”¹² which Haraway emphasized in *A Cyborg Manifesto*.

Haraway also already insisted on another point that is equally crucial for the past and present of cyberfeminism: the body as a material-semiotic entity¹³. Far from reproducing some form of biologist reductionism, such a relational concept of the body that interlaces material and discursive aspects represents the conviction that matter matters. In *Agential realism: How material-discursive practice matters* for example, Karan Barad radicalizes this kind of conception and focuses even more intensely on the material (and thus procedural) dimension.

“Language has been granted too much power. [...] Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter”¹⁴.

That this diagnosis cannot be simply accepted in the evolution of cyberfeminism is clearly illustrated both by the reference to Haraway and the reinterpretation in the performance. “G-slime [as a form of cyberfeminist practice, note R.A.] never forgot the flesh”. The significance of material reality becomes strikingly clear with regard to Carlo Giuliani, who was killed during the demonstrations against the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, in 2008. The experience that vulnerable

12 Haraway “A Manifesto for Cyborgs Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, pp. 25 ff., pp. 29 ff.

13 Cp. Donna Haraway “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse”, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 203–230, p. 208.

14 Karen Barad “Agential realism: How material-discursive practice matter”, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 132–185, p. 131.

bodies matter, ultimately has to result in an upheaval. Guilinaï as “no borg this, but fully human in his vulnerability” (p. 12) makes it necessary to reformulate the cyborg concept as an “othering machine” or “differencing engine”.

It already has been mentioned that the performance broaches the issue of how capitalism adopts sources of social dynamics. With regard to the materiality of the bodies, it must be noted that programmed bodies are particularly susceptible to this kind of capitalist adoption. The body could be used and abused as a field of experimentation and it is totally soaked with technology. Still, the question remains, whether we consider this fusion to be oppressive and a violent action towards ourselves, or as a possibility to celebrate a playful approach that we are able to actively control.¹⁵

The reconstruction of the history of cyberfeminism in the performance demonstrates that both history and matter matter, thus contradicting the allegation that cyberfeminism was ahistorical and only dealt with discursive practices. On the other hand, the Furies’ self-criticism and correction also refers to developments that can offer an explanation for why the optimistic promises have remained unfulfilled.

NEW BORGS AND THE ANALYSIS OF CRITIQUE

According to the statement: “Each wave of technological development creates its own cyborgs and monsters”, Da Rimini and Barratt suggest new borgs, which could respond to the changed conditions of emancipative practices¹⁶. Their first proposal is the viborg, which “howls discordant odes” and enables “destabilizing old assets” e.g. via the motion that “one becomes many”. I think the point here is to stress the vibrational motion rather than some form of upheaval, which means to develop a new concept of revolution that refers to a constant process of equivocation and setting things in motion. Moreover the Hexborg as a “GENerator” and “Différance Engine” is “always

15 Da Rimini and Barratt refer to this point in the discussion after the performance and point out that the sensual and playful approach towards the cyborg concept is formulated from a privileged position, inasmuch as it only functions from the perspective of an abled person. It would also be worthwhile examining the extent to which the idea of empowerment by means of a cyborg identity can be used in situations in which a cybernetic extension of the body becomes necessary instead of merely being a chosen strategy.

16 Haraway herself has also re-articulated her figures of resistance time and again and tries to develop new metaphors for new historical situations. Joseph Schneider claims that while the cyborg would be connected “to the science and technology of militarism, Cold War, the space race, and communications, the figure of companion species comes with an end-of-millennium history and presence of speed, collapsed distance, implosion, condensation” (Joseph Schneider, *Donna Haraway: Live theory*, London, New York, Continuum, 2005, p. 23f.)

becoming” and thus rejects a clear definition. This borg brings to mind the Hexexecutables, as a kind of resistance that is suitable for a programmed world. As the reflection of history has shown, this strategy needs to be adjusted. That is why the hexborg as a “[g]leaner of forgotten botanical knowledges” refers to something like a Kräuterhexe (“herb witch”) and points out the fact that in addition to software and programming skills, the dimensions of hexing and magic also have to be considered in new subversive practices. Finally, there is the cathexborg, “a charged occupation across sites, distributed centres, driven by affect, ignited by desire”. This borg is characterized by its practice of psychoanalytic cathexis and political occupation¹⁷ which is driven by affects and desires instead of navigating through forms of power politics. The advantage of this kind of strategy is its infectious functionality, which is unpredictable and thus could spread due to the fact that no counter-strategy has been developed yet.

The problem is the “yet”. Even if it is true, that at present there is no counter-strategy which is able to reintegrate this proposal of an emancipative strategy into a capitalistic logic, the question which was posed in the performance is, how one could entirely prevent the appropriation of subversive potential by capitalism. How is it possible to ensure the promises will be fulfilled this time?

With regard to these considerations, the first aspect of the analysis of critique that is suggested by the performance is that subversion functions as a reaction towards the transition of forms of societies. As we have seen in the first part, Haraway’s conception of the cyborg functioned according to this reactive logic, and its actualization by Da Rimini and Barratt similarly holds on to this. The second aspect is also mentioned above: the strategy of appropriation or resignification. This is particularly true for cyberfeminism’s attempt at appropriating technology, which is still important for the new borgs. But as we have seen with reference to these new suggested borgs, the problem is that appropriation is not a strategy reserved for emancipation. A third aspect of the kind of critique that is suggested by the performance consists in the reflection of history on the one hand, to create visions on the other. Insofar as the performance tries to reconstruct the elements in the history of cyberfeminism that are still capable of supporting emancipation, critique is conceptualized as constitutively situated.

Finally, the question arises of whether this concept of critique as a reaction towards the transitions of forms of societies, as appropriation

17 There is a hint in the discussion after the performance, that this borg is grounded in the very material of a real blockade and the communication systems in this opposite political practice which had functioned multi-headed.

and as a combination of history and visions, is capable of fulfilling promises of emancipation and subversion. Does the implied concept of critique only describe what is going on or does it also constitute a real critique of the social conditions? If we are living in a world that forces us to become cyborgs, it surely makes sense to achieve as much freedom of action as possible through appropriation, and to strive for a better understanding, as well as for the power of definition of these special kinds of borgs. This approach, however, cannot serve as a substitute for the fundamental necessity to criticize and change the conditions that force us to become viborgs, hexborgs or cathexborgs.

The form of subversive strategy that is implicitly recommended here represents a remapping, reiteration or repetition that initiates shifts and can thus be understood as immanent and affirmative. For the very reason that the alternative cannot be to readopt the idea of a concept of critique that is based on an innocent position in transcendence, it is crucial to critically question immanent and reactive figures of critique, for they are always closely interwoven with the very conditions they intend to criticize. In the end, the performance can be interpreted as an example of cyberfeminism's potential to scrutinize this kind of critical reflection time and time again, in order to master the difficult balancing act between subversion and affirmation.