

Rethinking Female Experience(s)

Nina Czegledy in conversation with Randy Cutler, Shilpa Gupta, Eleni Laperi, Nathalie Magnan, Maria Miranda, Norie Neumark and Susanna Paasonen.

During April 2002, seven of us, women artists and theorists, from across the world, corresponded by email on the theme of 'Rethinking (the feminist) Revolution.' We began by posing complex questions concerning trends in feminist theory and practice but, as often happens in these informal encounters between women, the discussion reflected in essence our own widely ranging experiences. I, the catalyst in this exchange, feel that instead of composing a text, it is best to present the individual views in the correspondents' own words.

Randy Cutler teaches cultural theory in Vancouver, Canada. In addition she has curated exhibitions, produced videos, lectured on a variety of topics and published widely. Her recent collaborative project *welcome to...the desert of the real* was organised on the thirtieth anniversary of the death of the science fiction writer Philip k. dick.

In 2002, does revolution imply a radical break with the past or perhaps a sustained challenged to dominant values and cultural norms? The question for this discussion states that the idea of revolution involves perpetual movement and constant change. This description could easily describe consumer capitalism and not necessarily politically motivated movement. With slogans like '**commodify your dissent**' and '**resistance is futile**' clogging up the image-stream, it is

increasingly difficult to effect positive and necessary change.

But perhaps resistance is still fertile. There are many lines of flight where revolutionary movement is concerned.

Cyberfeminism is a contemporary model that reflects '**perpetual movement and constant change**'. In terms of women's art and ideas of feminist art practice/ theory, feminist politics that are aligned with technoculture have proved to be provocative and emancipatory for many people. Understanding the language and processes of corporate cultural is fundamental to revolution. Because of the engaged relationship with dominant paradigms, issues around gender, difference, the disabled, sexuality, etc. have found renewed inspiration via technologically driven art and design practices.

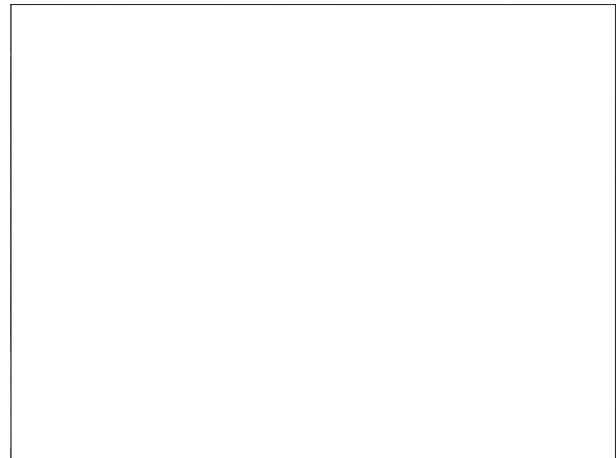
The women's movement means that I can embrace alternate

modes of being in my body and in the world that are not compromised by narrow, “*objective*” rationalism. It means that I can do research, teach and make art from a perspective that is embodied, connected and wilfully vulnerable. Historically and from my own location in North America, it has meant that I can do stimulating work and get paid on par with my brothers. It means that I am not afraid to speak up, make trouble and be heard. It means shared conversations where new knowledges can emerge between boundaries.

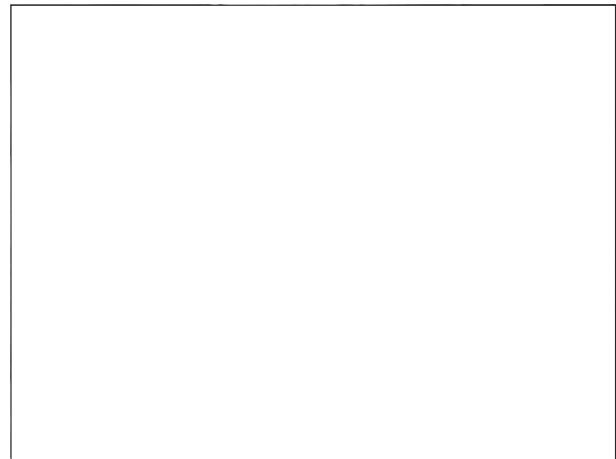
Cyberfeminism has become an art strategy providing an opportunity for feminists to influence the formation of new gender configurations via contemporary technologies. Cyberfeminism also means being increasingly aware of the impact of new technologies on the lives of women, and the insidious gendering of technoculture in everyday life. I understand cyberfeminism as praxis: where the theories and criticism of technology are woven through the activism and consciousness of twenty-first century feminism. The outspoken nature of cyberfeminism is manifest in the increased presence of women in online communities, computer engineering and critical thinking. Women everywhere, simultaneously fragmented and connected, are rewriting the cultural codes. Cyberfeminists are figures of resistance and metaphors of differential embodiment.

With each fresh posting to this discussion I have been and am humbled by the critical consciousness of others in this group. My age (38) and privileged Canadian experience means that I was often politicised [revolutionised/ hybridised] not by first-hand experience but rather by the deeds, actions and bravery of other women, by the woman’s movement in general with all of its complexity and contradictions. Judging by these postings, the revolution never ended, but rather is part of a continuum.

While I agree that women are not the holy saviours of the world, the women’s movement continues to influence positive gestures, providing alternate strategies. Yet these usually occur in grassroots, community-oriented initiatives and are less evident in the mainstream. As already discussed, the women’s movement along with civil rights, gay rights and worker’s rights have and continue to shape our individual and collective practices. Depending on our location and context, though, the sense of urgency, engagement and commitment is quite diverse.



Shilpa Gupta *Untitled* (2001) detail from installation and video
Below: hand stitching stained cloth onto pyjama s. Above: three such pyjamas hanging on terrace as if to dry.



Shilpa Gupta lives in Mumbai, India, producing installations, video and more recently artworks for the internet. Her www.sentiment-express.com, originally installed in a purple booth, was shown at the Tate Modern, London and focused on the large number of international companies who re-route their phone calls and internet sites through India. A new industry has developed in Mumbai, where English is widely spoken, labour is cheap and productivity high. The artist invites you to dictate a love letter and also select paper and scent for the letter of love! The letter will be sent to Mumbai to be transcribed, and mailed to your object of affection. . . with slight additions.

‘My works deal with, sort of, everyday experiences in which colourful ads offer me the very comfortable role of a consumer: such that I watch eat, drink and dispose of after use coke / skin / politics / you can add...’

The Indian art scene has not seen any organised women’s

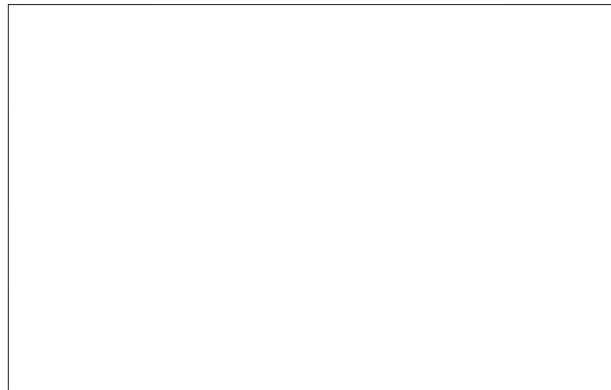
or feminist movement. There are some women's community-based organisations but no large feminist movement. In cultural practices, especially literature, there have been constant and frequent "*individual*" responses to gender issues. And by default women artists have been referring to gender and oppression. Is discussing oppression revolutionary? I don't know, because contemporary art consumes that too.

Maybe there is no major revolution as there has been no particular single moment of shared oppression; Indian society is terribly fragmented in caste and class and many people are living life in completely different eras. For example, in highly popular Indian soap operas the heroine is portrayed as "*highly traditional sari clad in super big bindi*" (a very regressive image). What is revolutionary (for the middle class housewife/consumer) is that it is this "*woman who is the main character and family figurehead*" and not the usual male.

I also wonder what is revolutionary now and whether it is important to be always revolutionary. Sometimes I think this is comparable with men's role in the 1700s as "*discoverers*". Somebody who sailed (into lands already inhabited) and stuck their flag there. And revolutionary also has to do with newness/attraction. Like certain art history movements are formed when there is a remarkable change in style. I wish to have space for evolutionary development instead, because evolution also allows for smaller changes to happen, maybe not so visible but still significant.

In India post-1990s, there are more Indian women artists than men who are venturing into new/experimental/installation work and asking difficult questions about hegemony and perception. They are not hugely revolutionary in the global arena but significant in the local context. About shared directions outside the country, I am always surprised how many times concerns and even visually works resemble each other! This might have to do with the fact that, besides being women, we are all subjected to shared perceptions via globalisation and the very dominant effects of information media.

Eleni Laperi, director of Lindart, the first Cultural Center of Artist Women in Tirana, Albania has a background in art history. Lindart opened on 15 February, 2001 and is focused on supporting and promoting Albanian women artists as well as international collaborative interdisciplinary projects.



Lumturi Billosmi (b.1944,Tirana) *The lost time*

'My dream was always to travel, to meet people of different cultures and make our world a better place. This is not easy, but it is not impossible...'

The word "*revolution*" has to be put into context for Albanian women, who lived through the communist regime between 1946-1989, when everything was considered revolutionary. The situation of women during this period was considered unique by the party-state and more developed than in other parts of the world. The emancipation of women was on the daily agenda, and according to Communist propaganda she was '**equal among the equals**' in the world's only happy country! But actually men remained stuck in the holiness of their own backwardness towards women. In this half-developed society, women found themselves doubly burdened and exploited both in the family and in society. Women artists were held to be incapable of handling great topics and were excluded from the higher management of cultural institutions. After 1990, for the first time women artists gained from the erstwhile emancipation of the country from dictatorship and now there are many great female artists. They often use their own body to illustrate the themes of women's problems and their work is frequently characterised by a lack of prejudice.

In the socialist period the organisation of women was directed by the party-state. There was only one organisation of artists, the League of Albanian Artists. Women were called "*Helpers of the Party*" in educating young human beings to think and wish for what the party dictated. The first association of women artists was founded in 1994. They don't chose to be called feminists even though they encounter many problems in a society which remains rigid and where gender continues to be a barrier to freedom and equality. I consider the women's movement an important choice for reaching a

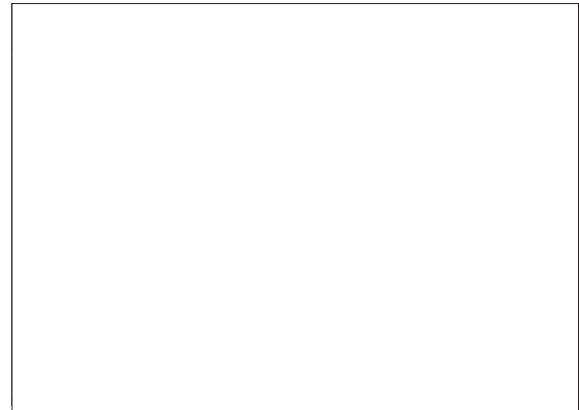
better quality of life for the society in general. It is clear that women's creativity has attained an undeniably high level, both in social and aesthetic directions.

In Albania the technological/aesthetic revolution is something yet to come. In reality, a 50-year-old backwardness in development exists compared to Western Europe. People have to resolve hard existential problems, and the level of using new technologies still remains the luxury of only rich and powerful enterprises. Women artists are not able to use these technologies for creating art works or to be in close or effective contact with other colleagues worldwide. Yet, young women especially are interested in working with the same new technologies. Most of them work in different private design firms as graphic designers and they have little time to work for themselves.

My opinion is that the technological/aesthetic revolution is certainly the best way for women to reach the power and the real position which society denied to them during past centuries. At Lindart we are doing our best to create possibilities for women to learn and use new technologies. Working together with people in different cities we are developing a new territory with technological equipment, as well as using women's creative capabilities for changing the way of thinking in our country, Albania.

Nathalie Magnan, cyberfeminist and media tactician (old and new), producer for Canal+ as well as Paper Tiger TV who lives in Paris, France. She is webmistress of several websites among which is <http://chiennesdegarde.org> (a feminist site with articles and discussion in french) and she is also co-moderator of nettime-fr. She is about to publish *Connexions: art media networks* (Paris: atles editions de l'ensb-a, 2002). She edited the reader *La video, entre art et communication* (Paris: ensb-a, 1997) and wrote several articles for *le monde diplomatique*; *libération* and *the independent* (NY) on issues of public access TV, tactic media and identity politics. She is a full professor at l'Ecole des Beaux Arts de Dijon.

The idea of revolution involves perpetual movement and constant change. The idea of revolution belongs to the 1968 generation. I came to this later, during the revolutionary disillusion. It's not a working concept for me, I feel much closer to the thesis developed by the autonomous movement 'conspirer'est respirer ensemble', who came together for an action and split afterwards. In 1981 a socialist president



Nathalie Magnan <http://chiennesdegarde.org>

was elected in France. This was the first time the left came to power in a long time. Within two years our disappointment was apparent. Nevertheless people were politically active and militant. Identity politics was re-appropriated by the government, especially in terms of race, gay politics and feminism. By the end of the 1980s, the French gay population was perhaps the most stricken by AIDS in Europe. By the mid-1990s a big transport strike shook the country. A new generation – some of whom have lived abroad – started to question everything and moved into action. Queers made great progress but feminism was still a borderline topic and considered not trendy, and we all know how the French can collectively become fashion victims. Yet, there were some women heroes of those dark years, who carried on, but they didn't have any media exposure.

How are these notions reflected in women's art and feminist art practice/theory? Besides very few exceptional women artists, it's very hard for a French woman to have some visibility. Orlan is a total exception. Some filmmakers manage to emerge (Yasmina Ben Guigui, for example), but once again I would not use the term revolution to describe them. There are women who are artists, there are people of all genders who are artists doing feminist work, but I'm not sure I know any women artists.

I could not live the same life, if my older sisters would not have opened this territory for my generation. A way of reading the world has been created that helps me be to alive. A way has been shown which aids me not to self-destruct instantly in the face of injustice, a way to productively drive my anger triggered by daily sexism. It offers me a place to breathe, not in the women's movement in general, but with some feminists in particular.

'We are the virus of the new world disorder rupturing

the symbolic from within saboteur of the big daddy main frame the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix terminator of the moral code' (fragments of *VNS Matrix Manifesto*)

Nina Czegledy, independent artist, curator and writer divides her time between Canada and Europe. She has initiated and curated international collaborative projects, produced art videos, interactive CDs, broadcast media and documentaries and has published online and in print both internationally and in her native Hungary.

I have never been formally involved in the feminist movement, however for nearly two decades a considerable portion of my work has been dedicated to the position and work of women. In the 1950s in Hungary, I was prevented from formal studies or active involvement by my family obligations, namely raising triplets; and later during the heroic revolutionary period in the 1960s and 1970s in Canada, by family reasons. At the first opportunity I staged my informal (not entirely bloodless but) very effective revolution. I feel that the women's movement made it possible for me to start a fresh "*newly wired*" existence in mid-life. Single again, I attempted to bridge (in a self-initiated micro fashion) cultural communication gaps between Eastern Europe and the West. Up till recently women's art and women's issues, especially feminist theories were viewed unenthusiastically in Eastern Europe. To my delight the last decade has witnessed slow but remarkable changes in the appreciation of women's art and creativity in this region. This is by no means a revolution, however the changes have been confirmed by exhibitions, publications, projects and festivals dedicated to exploring the concepts and work created by women. It is wonderful to note that despite long-standing prejudices more and more women cross successfully into the sacred technological realms. In my experience, the work of many women artists (globally) continues to be an exploration of the mythologies and stereotypes, the economic and social realities that form the content and question the perception of what is female experience.

Norie Neumark grew up on the east coast of the US and studied Russian history. After arriving in Australia, she gradually moved into cultural studies, art practice in radio and then new media. Her current teaching job in Sydney brings all these threads together. Norie's



Nina Czegledy *Regrets* (2001) still from 6 min. video. Screened at: *Women in the Director's Chair*, Chicago 2002; *Videomedija*, Novi Sad 2002; *VideoLisboa*, 2001; *Herland* 2002; *Boston Cyberarts Festival* 2001; *GIV*, Montreal 2001

concerns have included technology and subjectivity, bodies and, most recently, machines and emotions.

'My path along the way has been directed by the women's liberation movement, involvement in gay waves radio collective, and my art practice; and it has been diverted by the inevitable politics of working at a university and dealing with a bureaucracy that has grown more and more heavy and heavy-handed.'

As someone who was involved in the "*revolutionary*" women's liberation movement in Australia in its youth and my youth, both in political practice and academic work, I experienced intense change, upheaval, pleasure, bonding, frustration and alienation. With time, it became evident that Women was a problematic term, useful in pointing to social, political and cultural gender inequalities, but restrictive and exclusionary of other differences around sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, age. And dangerously risking return to the essentialism(s) that the early women's liberation movement had rejected. Some of the problems I would say were to do with Women as a concept and others to do with political movements. Feminism(s) have attempted to redress the problems, some more successfully than others. Meanwhile other identity politics, some of which I was involved in, went through many of the same ups and downs.

These experiences of mine and the wider social history in Australia have undoubtedly shaped my own consciousness profoundly, widened certain opportunities, and provided some invaluable support. In a certain way, I take the positives for granted; and the complexities of experience have tempered my initial euphoria and even



Norie Neumark and Maria Miranda *Volcano* at www.out-of-sync

ability to Identify as a Woman. Though of course, the world sees me as a woman, amongst other things, and this is something I have to deal with in what's most relevant here, and in my practice as a new media artist.

To begin with aesthetics. There are significant new media artists in Australia who are concerned with Women's issues as well as some who are trying to develop a Women's aesthetics. It is notable and important to mention just a few of the many and important new media artists in Australia who are women and to point to how they are working in vastly differing ways. Melinda Rackham, for instance, has contributed significant work which has opened up cyberspace in a radical way, creating an engaging and surprising Female soft space. Linda Dement has been concerned with female bodies and sexuality in a confronting, jagged/edgy way. Francesca da Rimini works with sexuality through alluringly, horrifyingly beautiful, excessive works. It is also important that there is room in new media art in Australia to be an artist who is a woman who does not address Women's issues or try to develop Women's aesthetics. This is where Maria and I are positioned, at the moment. This explains the aesthetics of our work such as *Shock in the Ear* and our installations and web work like *out_of_sync*.

The problems of working with technology for artists are certainly not solved yet. While one can no longer say that computer hysteria is limited to women, certain activities are still very divided along gender lines. A final point, that about which I'm ambivalent, is the concept of the feminine in art. Some would describe the work of the new media artists I mentioned as feminine in the radical philosophical sense of opening an "**Other**", different or new aesthetic space. To me, its problematic, however, that the term which refers to this most radical philosophical position also refers to the most

restrictive form of cultural gendering. But maybe it's in the heart of such problematic strangeness that new potential lies.

Maria Miranda is currently completing her Masters of Visual Art. She is simultaneously working on Surface Tension, a desktop based installation in Sydney, Australia, centered on Gertrude Stein's ideas about repetition and difference/ multiplicity and the continuous present. 'My concerns are screen reality, interactivity and fictive art.' For more than 10 years Maria collaborated with Norie Neumark. Their joint site is called *out_of_sync*. The title of their current net.art piece (based on Jules Verne's novel) is <Extraordinary Voyage/Voyage Extraordinaire>.

In previous incarnations I was involved in gay collectives and the women's movement. Many ideas and practices from the old days seem relevant to the new era of cyber/net/information culture, but how remains an open question.

It's interesting to note the greater number of women present/working/participating in early modernist art, especially in Australia. Many of the first modernists in Australia, between about 1920-1945, were women (all middle-class white women): for example, Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith, Nora Heysen, Thea Proctor, Dorrit Black, Grace Crowley and Ethel Spowers. Several took up print making, seeing the possibilities of this technology for image making and for pushing the boundaries of what art could be. All of them were heavily criticised at the time, as was early modernism in general, in the small parochial art world that existed in Australia then. '**It's not art, it's ugly, without beauty, without sense of colour.**' '**Printmaking is not art, where is the hand, a machine can't make art**' etc., etc.

Similarly with new media, the number of women (this time not all middle class, but nearly all white) new media artists again in Australia, are noteworthy (VNS Matrix, Linda Dement, Melinda Rackham, Francesca deRimini, Rea, etc.). There seems to be a strong tie between the idea of the modern and the women's movement. As new medias have developed, the exclusionary practices of traditional art/craft practices have been challenged. Standards and aesthetic hierarchies take time to establish and this has allowed groups of people previously excluded from certain practices, like art making, access to the "*new media*" art practices. Women have taken full advantage of this break.

Susanna Paasonen works as researcher at the department for Media Studies, University of Turku (Finland), where she is completing a PhD on the gendering and popularisation of the Net.

'I have a special passion for feminist theory old and new, but I also teach media studies, cinema and popular culture. I've published and edited four books, articles, and in addition to things academic, I'm involved with various net. art projects (see www.translocal.net/susanna)'

Re: revolution, a (stereo)typical cultural studies comment would be '**depends on the context**' and to define it does. I think of feminist practice in terms of a critical "*standpoint*" for re-thinking and re-imagining culture, society and its institutions. In this sense, subversion would signify shifts in ways of conceptualising gender, the status of heteronormativity and hegemonic whiteness, differences as other than binary. This can be thought of as revolutionary, not in the sense of a sudden rupture but perpetual movement.

Certainly there are recurring themes present in women artists' work and these can be seen as influenced by feminism (focus on identity, the personal, domestic, autobiographical, embodiment) and are commonly associated with a notion of women's art. But investigations into the politics of the personal, or play with gendered imageries of popular culture, is hardly done exclusively by women. And while there are groups and networks of women artists and feminists alike, I'm less certain about a sense of movement. Cyberfeminism, with its manifestos, would appear to indicate one, but it is also one void of feminist politics.

In Finland, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (most predominantly *Yhdistys 9*, with circa 70% female membership) was concerned with gender equality

and gender roles, while more radical/socialist feminist groups were far less visible. It seems to me that while equality discourse remains dominant, feminism is something people identify with on individual grounds rather than those of movement. (The closest thing to a movement recently would be lesbian and gay rights activism, which last year resulted in changes in legislation for registering partnerships, and those involved in activism against violence against women.)

Having identified myself as feminist from an early age, obviously the women's movement matters to me. The possibilities I have in life are greatly due to feminist activism, but also equality politics in the framework of a social-democratic welfare state. At the same time, the women's movement is something I study (in a historical sense): I'm especially interested in how the rhetoric of sisterhood and support has become appropriated in wider media discourses as a signifier of things female, as well as the Othering that takes place in relation to the Second Wave.

In terms of identifications, mine are with feminist/women's studies. I find it crucial to account for the bias in the women's movement (racism, classism, heteronormativity), and to redefine feminism as a critical standpoint not only inclusive of, but based on, differences. These questions are especially pressing in the new "*Fortress Europe*" where borders are closing and nationalistic ideologies are struggling with pan-European ones, both of which are equally based on ideals of shared heritage and culture. In feminism there remains a crucial challenge to develop alliances not based on origins, or national/ ethnic/ geographic locations.

As a medium, the Internet certainly enables the spread of information, and facilitates networking and critical debates: the *Undercurrents* listserv, moderated by Irina Aristarkova, Coco Fusco, Maria Fernandez and Faith Wilding is an excellent example of these possibilities, with its debates over racism, the institutions of media, art, politics, feminism and post-colonial theory.

I believe that there remains a "*subversive*" potential in the use of new technologies. Which is why I remain suspicious of theorists who collapse digitization with some process of automatic '**feminisation**' (Sadie Plant), or define the Internet as a cyberspace of fluid identities (Sherry Turkle, Sandy Stone). These visions tend to, in different ways, forget about power, embodiment and location, and depict the medium as both a subversive force (or agent)

and an alternative realm of self-exploration. I appreciate less metaphoric approaches in feminist investigations of the Internet, identity and embodiment that do not (paraphrasing Sara Ahmed) postulate gender as the only difference that matters.

Maria and Norie respond and conclude:

In Susanna's subversive reading of feminist subversion we'd agree with a concern to take the power relations that feminist theory and practice interrogates beyond simple gender oppositions. We'd like to respond in particular to her opening up of the issue of "*women artists*" as a group and her point that the issues these artists address (and their ways of making art) are not necessarily confined to those of "*women artists*" as the situation here seems similar in Australia to that in Finland. Though "*women artists*" offers a handy shorthand, maybe the term is problematic in the nature of the connection it implies between woman "*and*" artist, and the assumptions about both that are elided. Separating women and artists with an "*and*" allows "*and*" to do its work of pointing to multiplicity in the Deleuzian and Steinian sense – the multiplicities of woman and of artist and of... Which brings us to Gertrude Stein (a current focus of ours), whose work on still life and domestic objects was in the paradigm and context of cubism/ modernism rather than femininity, though certainly her gender, sexuality and delight in domestic life played a role in her work. While she worked at a time when being a woman and lesbian and an artist was not easy, her context was before the identity politics which has meant that to recognise those difficulties often means to assert a single, flattening, same identity. Maybe "*and*" also opens up the question of collaboration as a feminist practice, as a way to break down hierarchies of knowing and doing, without asserting sameness. In a way that's what our online collaboration is attempting and part of what seems very important and exciting here. Maybe we're avoiding the issue of revolution because it's been so complicated by historical experiences, both at the international, national and personal level. Rather than go into all that, we're wondering if it is so important or urgent to redefine and reclaim revolution?

Probably the most striking impression for us, from the postings, is how different our positions are, and yet there are definitely shared ideas as well. The idea of a Women's movement seems problematic for most of us, post-post-

feminism. Another thread is the relationship of women's movement activity to the historical moment that its in, as well as to its specific location? For instance, Eleni's description of the Albanian situation, Shilpa's discussion of the Indian art scene and Nathalie's explanation of French political history.

For us, women's movements and (cyber)feminisms that rest on essentialism or identity politics and that invoke "*woman*" in a way that precludes differences are problematic. Re-reading Nathalie's, Randy's, and Susanna's postings, we would say that the women's movement and (cyber)feminisms seem even more paradoxical to us – sometimes necessary, sometimes fun, sometimes subversive, sometimes conservative, sometimes stifling, sometimes irreverent, sometimes irrelevant. This has as much to do with the general political moment in the local context as with the internal political (and personal) theory and practice of the group.

We remain wary of any politics that posits or assumes Woman as holy saviour of the world. To us, it is not really convincing as well as being ultimately a trap; and we think that even a radical view of the Feminine has to contend with or address this sort of issue. Similarly, we would worry about a cyberfeminism that essentialises technology as either masculine or feminine (or good or bad) but rather would want to see it concerned with how to put technology into play.

An important part of this discussion among women in different locations for us has been that a range of practices by women who are artists were discussed. It seems that in India, Australia and Albania (as compared to France) many of these artists are at the forefront of innovation in new media art, and that their concerns and approaches are varied. Shilpa pointed out that where concerns and perceptions are shared, it is due in part to globalisation and dominant international information media. This does not deny the significance of art about gender, embodiment, sexuality, women's daily lives etc. but does significantly contextualise it. It is very important for us that there also be room for and recognition of artists who are women and who are, as Eleni said, '**handling the great topics**' (or even the mundane topics) – topics not authorised by feminists but hopefully of interest to them.