

Female Extension

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The following text is a review of *Female Extension* in hindsight. The intervention was the attempted hack of the first competition of Internet art, held by the museum *Hamburger Kunsthalle* in 1997. It was my first active involvement with Internet art and should lead to a long-standing investigation of the marriage of Internet, art and politics.

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Background

In February of 1997 the 'Galerie der Gegenwart' (Gallery of Contemporary Art) of the *Hamburger Kunsthalle* (Hamburg Art Museum) was the first museum in the world to announce an Internet art competition. The name of the competition was *Extension*, and it was meant to create an extension of the museum into virtual space—with the help of potent supporters: the German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, their website *Spiegel online*, and the German branch of the multinational Dutch electronics corporation *Philips*.

The competition posed the question of how the traditional tasks of the museum, i.e. collecting, preserving, mediating, and doing research, could be applied to Internet art. Thus, the call for contributions to *Extension* asked explicitly for 'net art,' and not for 'art on the net.' Traditional works of art should not be represented in digital format, instead the museum asked for artistic works that transferred familiar art concepts, such as 'material' and 'object' to the Internet. With this experiment, the Gallery of Contemporary Art entered a new territory, and therefore gained the attention of a world-wide public. In an interview, the organiser Frank Barth in 1997, he explained that the purpose of the competition was a PR move to advertise the new wing of the museum and the winners of the competition would form the basis of another new department of the museum, the 'virtual department.' He also admitted that the competition was an experiment and that decisions regarding the future of the virtual department would depend on the results of the competition.

In the year before, in 1996, I had received a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to conduct research in the evolving scene of Internet art. The study focussed on Europe and the US and was carried out in

winter 1996/97. It resulted in a general overview of the various Internet related art activities. I cannot cover all aspects of the research outcome, but one thing that is relevant for the background of the intervention described above is the finding of an increasing interest from the side of the traditional art world in Internet art, while these art institutions lacked resources and expertise to deal with this new art form. Without sufficient theoretical and practical knowledge of the specificities of the Internet, net art was at risk of being pigeon-holed and assessed according to traditional aesthetic and economic considerations.

Also in the case of the *Extension*, certain conditions of the competition indicated that the organisers were not fully aware of the specificities of the new medium. For example, one requirement was that the artists had to upload their projects to the museum server—despite the fact that the call stipulated that the Internet should be the site where the artwork is located. This demand clearly limited the range of possible submissions: what would remain of works that were based on communication, exchange and interaction with the user, works that were in a permanent process of change, or works that were based on links to other sites?

Another example for the tendency to handle net art inappropriately in the traditional art context was *documenta x* in Kassel in the same year. There, all Internet art projects were shown in a separate space and presented offline as a precaution against feared abuse by the visitors (Bosma, 2011). Additionally, the same projects were accessible via Internet on the *documenta* homepage, which was taken offline after the 100 days of the real-space exhibition. To critically comment on that handling, Slovenian artist Vuk Cosic downloaded the complete website one day before closure and made it available through his own server.¹

The intervention *Female Extension* has to be seen against this background. It was designed to mark the point in time when Internet art entered the traditional art world.²

Description

The concept of *Female Extension* was to disrupt or, at best, destroy the first competition for Internet art described above by flooding it with hundreds of participants. As Weiß (2009) put it, *Extension* was “the object as well as the

¹ Available at: http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx/english/frm_home.htm

² See also section five of this chapter for a more detailed discussion of the institution-critical potential of Internet art.

target of *Female Extension*” (p.267). I invented 289 female net artists, of whom more than 200 were registered for the competition. The names were partly taken from international phone books, and partly invented. For their registration, the ‘female artists’ had to send in their complete addresses with phone numbers, plus working e-mail addresses, which were assigned to seven different countries.³ In return, the museum supplied a password for each participant, which would enable him/ her to upload their work to the museum server.

In a first press release, issued on 3rd July 1997, the museum happily announced: “280 applications – two thirds are women.” A number of print media published this news tidbit and disseminated the surprise and joy about the high number of participating women.⁴

In a next step, I had to produce artworks that could be uploaded to the museum server. Initially, the plan was to copy and paste random HTML-code ‘by hand’ to create the entries. Initial experiments had already been successful, when a programmer suggested the use of a computer programme. He wrote a simple ‘Perl’-script⁵ that collected HTML-material on the World Wide Web with the help of search engines and automatically recombined the found material to become a new website. In this manner, 127 ‘art projects’ were generated, combined with project titles and the names of the fictitious female artists, and uploaded onto the museum server.

Again, the museum expressed great satisfaction in another press release: “On the closing date on 30th June, 120 megabyte of Internet art had been submitted. 96 of the artists were from Germany, 81 from the Netherlands, 28 from the US, 27 from Slovenia, 26 from Austria and the rest from GB” (Sollfrank, 2004, p.135).⁶ So far, the ‘flood’ of participants had not caused any damage and the process of judging started.

For the first time in art history, a jury assessed Internet art. This jury consisted of

³ For the complete list of names go to:
<http://artwarez.org/projects/femext/content/liste.html>

The countries were selected in conjunction with the collaborating servers, who provided the e-mail addresses. Also see acknowledgements at the end of this section.

⁴ A selection of newspaper articles (in German) is available at the documentary page:
<http://artwarez.org/projects/femext/content/presse.html>

⁵ *Perl* is an interpreted programming language developed in 1987 by Larry Wall as a general-purpose Unix scripting language. It is one of the most discussed and used languages on the Internet, usable for various purposes, and it contains a huge number of libraries and resources: <http://perl.about.com/od/gettingstartedwithperl/p/whatisperl.htm>

⁶ The original documents are part of my private archive and no longer available on the museum website.

the art historians Prof. Dr. Uwe M. Schneede and Prof. Dr. Dieter Daniels, the artists Dellbrügge & deMoll and Prof. Valie Export, as well as journalist and editor of *Der Spiegel* Rainer Wörtmann. In a statement published later, jury member Dieter Daniels remembers a flood of data trash and his astonishment about its origin (Sollfrank, 2004, p.76). However, the jury did not disclose the secret, or rather the programme, behind the mysterious flood and chose three male artists to be the winners—despite the massive participation of females.

On 14th September 1997, the museum announced the winners at a press conference. As the flood of participants neither caused any technical problems, nor any suspicion on the part of the jury, the only possibility left was to reveal the invisible intervention myself. I issued a press release that explained my contribution to *Extension* and presented it at the museum's press conference. The following press coverage focussed to a great extent on my intervention, *Female Extension*. The weekly newspaper *Die Woche*, named me "Hacker of the Week" on 26th September 1997, the daily newspaper *taz* elected me in their issue of 29th October 1997 to be the actual winner of the competition (Werneburg, 1997), the media partner of the competition, the news magazine *Spiegel online*, however, scoffed at the computer programme that "obviously suffered from a lack of artistic originality,"⁷ while the Austrian art magazine *springer* laughed at the clueless jury (Baumgärtel, 1997). Although my original plan to disturb the procedure of the competition failed, the subsequent disclosure of the intervention caused considerable damage to the museum's image and eventually led those responsible to abandon any efforts to expand into virtual space.⁸

Reflection

In the art historical and art critical reception, *Female Extension* was predominantly associated with cyberfeminism⁹ and labelled as a cyberfeminist intervention. And it was also the name of the intervention itself, *Female*

⁷ SPIEGEL ONLINE 38/1997. Kultur extra, 15.09.97

⁸ Although the homepage of the competition EXTENSION is still online, it is no longer linked to the museum website. It is only reachable through deep linking:
[http://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/_aext/wettb.htm#oben].

In 1997, the museum considered the net art competition as a 'unique selling point,' as Weiß (2009) comments, but today neither the museum's project documentation site, nor their exhibitions archive contain any reference to the competition.

⁹ Cyberfeminism started to emerge in 1991 and evolved most of its activities until 2001. What could be described as common denominator is a feminist inspired approach to new technologies. According to Volkart (2000) one of the various aspects explored by cyberfeminism was the seemingly new potential to experiment with identity online, including the possibilities of creating fake identities. But cyberfeminism was anything but a homogeneous political movement, and cyberfeminist groups and individuals of the 1990s generally refused rigid definitions (see also: <http://www.obn.org/cfundef/100antitheses.html>). In my understanding it opened up a field to explore different notions of politics, which included artistic strategies.

Extension, which turned the perception into a specifically gendered issue by seizing on the original title and expanding it with a ‘female aspect’—despite the fact that it plays with the technical notion of male and female plugs.

According to Greene (2004), the fact that all invented net artist were females “called attention to the gender imbalance among technoartists” (p.84). This gender aspect led her to compare *Female Extension* to “Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), which also created a symbolic body of work and a legacy of female (albeit fictional) artists” (p.84). Due to the collaboration with several groups and individuals, who provided the e-mail addresses, and the help of two programmers, Greene (2004) also classifies *Female Extension* as an “important early collective project” (p.83).¹⁰ Additionally, in her interpretation of the work, she mentioned a further aspect, namely the alleged critique of the “incompetence of those who show, curate, categorize and judge net art” (p.84). Tribe and Jana (2006) also consider the intervention as cyberfeminist and even ascribe to it “a key role in the history of cyberfeminism” (p.88). In their overview *New Media Art* the authors tag *Female Extension* with the terms ‘cyberfeminism,’ ‘hactivism,’ ‘intervention,’ and ‘tactical media.’ They emphasise the combination of political and artistic agency in the project and see a particular ironic turn in the fact that one of the jury members was the legendary feminist performance artist Valie Export.

Weiß (2009) discusses *Female Extension* with regard to the term ‘artistic net activism’ (p.281) and lists a number of aspects, which would allow for such an interpretation. Here, too, the first context he associates the project with is cyberfeminism, in particular the international cyberfeminist alliance *Old Boys Network*, which I initiated in 1997.¹¹ My personal involvement as cyberfeminist activist and the fact that the virtual net artists were all females prompts him to read *Female Extension* as cyberfeminist action. Weiß (2009) interprets the intervention as a critique of the hidden sexism of art institutions, in particular art prizes and competitions. His main argument, however, is the fact that the

¹⁰ *Female Extension* would not have been possible without the large network of contributors who supported the project: Konrad Becker and Herbert Gnauer (t0.netbase, Wien), Wolfgang Staehle and Gisela Ehrenfried-Staehle (The Thing, New York), Heath Bunting, Rachel Baker and Steve Mynott (irational.org, London), Luka Frelj (ljudmila.org, Ljubljana), Neil de Hoog and Andreas Broeckmann (V2, Rotterdam), Geert Lovink (Digitale Staat Amsterdam), Michael van Eeden (Society for Old and New Media, Amsterdam), Rob Bank and Walter van der Cruysen (desk, Amsterdam), Barbara Aselmeier and Karl Heinz Jeron (Internationale Stadt Berlin), Knut Johannsen (surver.net, Hamburg), and Tilman Baumgärtel.

¹¹ OBN was active from 1997-2001. The website is an archive of all activities. <http://obn.org>

museum that ran the competition, the Hamburger Kunsthalle, negates all traces that would lead to the competition or the intervention. According to Weiß (2009) this indicates that the approach of the museum is to not recognise the intervention as an art project, which reinforces his approach of reading it as political activism (p. 281).

Bosma (2011) also closely associates *Female Extension* with the cyberfeminist movement and considers the work along with such “art projects [that] aimed to counter the typical masculine discourses in new media networks; they subverted the development of digital institutions, on and offline, as it went along, trying to positively influence it in favour of women. Net art, with or without punctuation mark, was one of these institutions” (unpublished). According to Bosma (2011), my work is critical in two directions: towards institutions, and towards other artists: “Sollfrank started a very elaborate and critical series of projects, which aimed at the subversion of both, certain art institutional tendencies concerning net art and net.art’s male genius” (unpublished). And she expands this notion to include a more general institutional critique when she writes: “To Sollfrank, net art had nothing to do with the gallery and museum system, and could therefore not be judged by these institutions” (unpublished).

Bosma’s reading of *Female Extension* as a cyberfeminist action that combines feminism and institutional critique comes closest to my own understanding of the work. For me, the most important aspect, however, is the one of ‘institutional critique.’ There is certainly a (cyber)feminist component within *Female Extension*, and compared to more ‘traditional’ notions of ‘institutional critique,’ it involves the exploration of the potential of digital, networked media for artistic political uses. As an early precursor, an action of the *Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee*, an offshoot of the *Art Worker Coalition* (AWC) can be instanced. The group launched a faked press release for the 1970 Whitney Annual exhibition announcing that the show would include fifty percent women artists, and fifty percent of them non-white, followed by a illegal screening of women’s works onto the museum walls from outside at the opening day (Lippard, 1973).

Institutional critique is an art practice that emerged in the 1960s in the context of minimalism and conceptual art and had a second wave in the 1980s (Sheikh, 2006). For the reflection on *Female Extension*, it is of importance to know that it can generally be defined as a critical inquiry into the workings of art institutions, such as galleries and museums, or the ‘institution of art’ as such (Stimson, 2009)¹². And it was Baumgärtel (2002) who first explicitly pointed out the aspect of institutional critique, when he said in our interview: “Your *Female Extension* reminds me of the contextual art or the institutional critique of the early nineties. In the art world at the time, there was also this idea of focussing on and calling into question the conventions, the mechanisms of the creation of norms and canon.” (p.79). Given the specific situation in 1997 regarding the increasing institutionalisation of net art, i.e. the exhibition of net art in gallery spaces and museums, first critical essays, and the competition described above, it was obvious that net art was about to enter a new period. Whereas net artists had previously organised their own contexts, communication and distribution structures, my understanding was that institutionalisation would constrain the democratising potential of the Internet. By applying traditional notions of art to net art, the usual mechanisms of selection, of inclusion and exclusion would become effective and reduce net art to the paradigms of traditional art. *Female Extension* was designed not only to indicate symbolically that specific point in time, but also to disrupt and hamper this process. Although the intervention ultimately did not prevent the takeover, in the concrete case of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, the museum decided to back off from net art after the ‘failure’ of the competition. “Due to Sollfrank’s ‘hack,’ the competition was demoted to complete insignificance, and the organisers withdraw it from the public by removing the links to the *Extension* website. (...) In the aftermath, the museum avoided any transparent discussion and reflection of the project, and thus abandoned its actual assignment to explore the potential of the new artistic phenomenon on the net and to present and preserve net art projects related to the competition (Weiß, 2009, p.273-274). However, in the long run, net art has proved to be quite resistant and improper for the general purposes of the art world, including commercialisation, which is also part of the discussion of Internet art in section 4 of this chapter.

¹² I will further elaborate on the practice of institutional critique in section 4 of this chapter.

For Weiß (2009), “the way in which Sollfrank intervened in 1997 was a novelty. Her coherent concept used Internet technology as well as ‘older media’ to showcase the questionable aspects of this kind of competition” (p.267, my translation). Thus, the aspect of institutional critique was complemented by an innovative use of technology, which actually foregrounded the potential of the medium for artistic use. This, on the other hand, was exactly what the call for submissions had asked for, artworks that used “the Internet as material and object.” However, the fact that the museum, represented by the jury, was not able to detect this intervention and adequately deal with it, proved, according to Vorkoeper (2004), what I had alleged in the first place: that the power mechanisms of the art world would come into effect. “That the significant similarity of the pages did not come to the attention of the Hamburg experts might point to a recurring blindness and thoughtlessness when faced with issues of authorship and ethics in the digital media” (p. 130). Werneburg (1997) wrote that the jurors put themselves in the dock and “out of competition, it is Cornelia Sollfrank who won the prize,” with which Bosma (2011) also agrees: “... to anybody working in the area of net art the obvious, real winner of *Extension* was Cornelia Sollfrank” (unpublished). These statements indicate the paradox inherent to all artistic institutional critique: while attacking the art institutions—and the institution art—, it is these very institutions that ultimately ensure the inclusion and elimination of this kind of critique. Although, in the case of *Female Extension*, the museum itself refused to acknowledge the intervention as art, it was the critics and theoreticians specialised and knowledgeable in Internet art who recognised the work so that it was subsequently included and discussed in all relevant literature.

Apart from the fact that the Hamburger Kunsthalle ceased all efforts to expand into the virtual world and subsequently no longer welcomed me nor appreciated the work, the intervention appeared to have an enormous unexpected impact on my future work. The randomly produced websites that I submitted to the competition caught my attention and motivated me to pursue the idea of automated online art production. So, out of a concrete institutional critique that addressed a specific situation and institution, a much more complex abstract criticism arose: that of authorship, originality and the notion of a finished piece of work. The *net.art generator* was born.

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