In 1991 the Internet was born. That same year, the term ‘Cyberfeminism’ was coined simultaneously by British philosopher Sadie Plant and by the Australian art collective VNS Matrix. Just as the tech bros of the dot-com boom optimistically believed the internet would change the world for the better, Cyberfeminists had techno-utopian aspirations for radical feminism. Cyberfeminists saw the virtual world as an opportunity to abandon the sexist social conditions of meatspace and rebuild equitable social relations in cyberspace. They found theoretical grounding in the works of theorist Donna Haraway—who wrote The Cyborg Manifesto that rejects the rigid boundaries that separate binaries like human/animal, man/woman, and natural/artificial—and Octavia Butler—a science fiction writer who described futuristic and extraterrestrial worlds that similarly espoused essentializing distinctions and rigid boundaries.
Meanwhile, artists were beginning to use the internet as a medium. Early Net Artists, like JODI, Vuc Kosic, and Heath Bunting, took advantage of the web’s ubiquity and accessibility, calling on its world-wide users to become participants in their html-based works. But like the dot-com culture that was forming in Silicon Valley, Net Art was a realm dominated by men. And Net Art, historically, is remembered as such. Here, we’re delving into a group of women Net Artists who founded Cyberfeminist Art, combining feminist theory with Net Art-making, making space online for collaborative artistic expression with radical intentions. Funny, brash, and ambitious, the works of the Cyberfeminists exuded an energy and optimism that made it seem like the abolition of gender might actually be achievable—at least in cyber space.

As the dot-com bubble burst, so did the techno-utopian dreams of a radical feminist takeover. Despite the good intentions of the internet’s early adopters, we now know that misogyny, racism, and bigotry are as prevalent online as they are in real life. The online world simply replicated the social conditions of the real world, and in some cases, exacerbated the worst of them by allowing online users to express themselves anonymously—a characteristic that Cyberfeminists thought would be liberating but instead has encouraged bullying, chastising, even death threats.

Nevertheless, just as Net Art has been canonized as an important art historical movement, Cyberfeminist Art deserves a second look. And though the present doesn’t reflect the future the Cyberfeminists hoped for, their enthusiasm and radical determination continues to inspire us. In an effort to help ‘re-write’ Net Art history, here are __ Cyberfeminist artworks of the ‘90s you should know.

**VNS MATRIX - All New Gen** (1995) - In 1991, Cyberfeminist Art began with a “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21stCentury.” Written by a group of Australian women (Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini, and Virginia Barratt) who called themselves the VNS Marix, the manifesto described the group as “terminators of the moral codes... disrupting the discourse,” “the virus of the new world disorder; saboteurs of big daddy mainframe; the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix.” Says Virginia Barrat in an 2014 interview with Motherboard, "The VNS Matrix emerged from the cyberswamp during a southern Australian summer circa 1991, on a mission to hijack the toys from technocowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent." Equal parts fierce and vigilant, poetic and funny, VNS Matrix collectively made works that thumbed its nose at the status quo, using new technology (at the time) to disseminate their messages to global audiences. They collectivized in chatrooms and online message boards, inspiring an entire movement of early adaptors to think big and occupy space in the wild west of the new digital world.
Their most well-known work, *All New Gen*, took the form of a video game. It begins by asking the player, “What is your gender?” Of the three options (male, female, or neither), all but “neither” will send the player in a game-ending loop. Ultimately, the game prompts the player and its army of “cybersluts” and “anarcho cyber-terrorism” to hack into the “Big Daddy Mainframe”: a symbol of patriarchy. At that time, Barratt says, the internet “was a masculinist space, coded as such, and the gatekeepers of the code (cultural and logos) maintained control of the productions of technology.” Not only were the “cyberslut” protagonists female, which at that time was almost unheard of in the gaming world, their mission was to dismantle the male-dominated technological ideologies (represented by the Mainframe and his cronies “Circuit Boy, Streetfighter, and other total dicks”) and begin a New World Disorder. How? With “G-slime” shot from weaponized clitorises, of course. Don’t worry, players could get assistance from fellow “mutant shero DNA Sluts.” Take *that*, Fortnight.

**LINDA DEMENT** - *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* (1995) - VNS Matrix wasn’t alone in making feminist video games in 1995. They also weren’t the only Australians to do so either. (What’s with Australia and Cyberfeminism? Some have said the country’s geographical isolation from the rest of the world prompted an enthusiastic adoption of the internet’s communicative and connective capabilities.) Australian artist Linda Dement made a CD-ROM-based video game called *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*. To create it, she first asked roughly 30 women to “donate” their body parts by scanning their flesh. They also recorded sound. Then Dement spliced the fleshy scans together, reassembling them to create grotesque and monstrous creatures that could be animated and interacted with on the computer. When the player clicks on one of these monsters, they trigger a response in the form of an audio clip, text blurb, video, or, another girlmonster might appear. As the player continues, a non-linear narrative unfolds: “a macabre comedy of monstrous femininity, of revenge, desire and violence,” states the artist. Since this early work, Dement has continued to make work, often in collaboration with people working in disparate fields — psychotherapists, writers, performers, engineers, etc., and has expanded her practice to also investigate climate change.
FAITH WILDING & subRosa - *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs*, 2002 - Born in Paraquay in 1943, Faith Wilding started her career well before the invention of the internet. She participated in the well-known feminist exhibition "Womenhouse" organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. (Wilding served as a teaching assistant in the Feminist Art Program at California State University, Fresno, which Chicago founded in 1970.) A prolific artist and writer, Wilding authored a number of texts about feminist issues, and remains widely cited in feminist literature and academia today. Her exhibition record isn’t too shabby either; she’s shown her work at the Whitney Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, and the Bronx Museum among many others. But what many people don’t know about Wilding is that she identified with the Cyberfeminists in the ‘90s, and the evidence is illustrated in her “Recombinants” works. Though they aren’t digital or web-based like the rest of the works on this list, they speak to the intersection of plant, animal, human, and technological bodies—an important aspect of Cyberfeminist though. Like the amalgam “Girlmonster” creatures of Linda Dement’s video game, Wilding’s series of drawings, collages, and paintings depict hybrid, cyborgian bodies.

In 1998, Wilding founded the cyberfeminist organization subRosa with artist Hyla Willis. Their manifesto states: “subRosa is a reproducible cyberfeminist cell of cultural researchers committed to combining art, activism, and politics to explore and critique the effects of the intersections of the new information and biotechnologies on women’s bodies, lives, and work... Let a million subRosas bloom!” Most of subRosa’s works are either performances or texts, and as an ‘anti-copyright’ collective, they make their materials freely available online and downloadable as PDFs. For a 2002 performance, they created a website (screenshot pictured above) that provides a darkly satirical quiz that analyzes "your net worth on the flesh market." Checkboxes include "I have blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes" and "I like shopping more than most activities"; if checked, the website increases the participant’s "value" as a potential egg donor, calling attention to how reproduction has become not only customizable, but that it also problematically replicates oppressive societal values.
**SHU LEA CHEANG - Brandon** (1998) - While it's true that Cyberfeminist Art probably hasn't received the institutional recognition it's deserved, Shu Lea Cheang is beginning to make up for it; we wrote about the artist's work in an upcoming exhibition at the New Museum curated by the museum's digital arm, Rhizome. In *this month's edition Artist to Watch*, we wrote about some of Cheang's most well-known works, which are primarily post-capitalist science fiction. But Cheang also worked within the Cyberfeminist framework. In 1998, the Guggenheim awarded its first web commission to Cheang for the work *Brandon*. Named after Brandon Teena, a young transgender man who was raped and murdered in Nebraska in 1993, the multifaceted piece takes the form of browser pop-ups, chat rooms, and livestreamed conferences. Users participate in the nonlinear work that unfolds around issues of trans identity, gender, and technology. From the Guggenheim: “Exploiting the highly mutable “skin” of the Internet, Cheang reveals how this emerging virtual environment enables individuals to inhabit and play with different gender roles and characters. A prime example of “cyberfeminism,” *Brandon* utilizes technology as a means to break down social assumptions about gender in both the realm of technology and in society at large.”

![Image via Guggenheim.](image-url)
LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

Roberta Breitmore (1974 - 2006)

Lynn Hershman Leeson was incredibly ahead of her time. Well before the Cyberfeminist Movement—and well before the internet, for that matter—Leeson was the first artist to make an interactive artwork using Videodisc (a precursor to the DVD). Made in 1983-84, the film disk Lorna enables viewers to gain access to the main character’s emotions in the manner of a ‘name your own adventure’ story by allowing them to make important life decisions for her (not entirely unlike Netflix’s recent release of the interact Black Mirror movie called Bandersnatch… 35 years later). Leeson was also the first artist to use a touch screen interface in an artwork (Deep Contact, 1984-1989). She also used robotics, video, and performance. She’s perhaps best known for her project Roberta Breitmore: an alter ego and fictional persona she developed from 1972 to 1982. During this time period, Roberta Breitmore was more than just embodied; her existence could be “proven” by a paper trail of credit cards, letters from her psychiatrist, even a driver’s license. Eventually, Roberta was “cloned” and the artist hired a number of other performers to enact the character. In 1995, Roberta underwent another transformation: CybeRoberta. An early AI sculpture that existed on the web, the character could interact with users online. In 2006, she became a character on Second Life. Though Leeson may not typically be considered a Cyberfeminist, her contributions to new media certainly helped pave the way for the movement, and for Net Art in general.
Anglim Gilbert Gallery