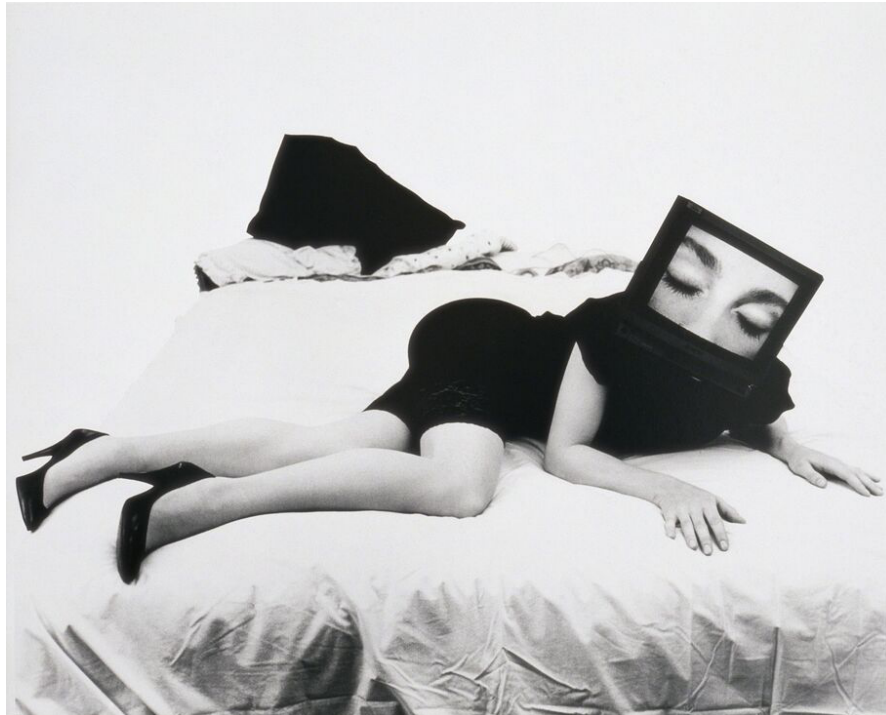




**A Brief History of Cyberfeminism**  
**Written by: Isabella Scott**  
**October 13, 2016**



**Lynn Hershman Leeson, Seduction, 1986.**

The field of cyberfeminism, which will be explored by the digital art resource Rhizome as part of their upcoming initiative Net Art Anthology, emerged in the early 1990s after the arrival of the world wide web, which went live in August 1991. Its roots, however, go back to the earlier practices of feminist artists like Lynn Hershman Leeson. Cyberfeminism came to describe an international, unofficial group of female thinkers, coders, and media artists who began linking up online. In the 1980s, computer technology was largely seen as the domain of men—a tool made by men, for men. Cyberfeminists asked: Could we use technology to hack the codes of patriarchy? Could we escape gender online?

On the West Coast, Faith Wilding, a groundbreaking feminist artist prominent in the 1970s for her participation in the seminal installation *Womanhouse* (1972), had begun to adopt the cyberfeminist moniker. Wilding began a collage series in the early 1990s called “Recombinants.” The works are composed of images of machines, plants, humans, and animal bodies, creating a point of intersection between life forms and technology. She described the results as “an uneasy, monstrous depository of melancholic historical fragments” in an artist statement.

# ANAT EBGİ

By 1997, there were enough people identifying as cyberfeminists to warrant a meet-up. The First Cyberfeminist International was organized by a Berlin collective, satirically named the Old Boys Network after the circles of male privilege on which patriarchy feeds. The collective's five women framed the event, which brought together 38 women from 12 countries at Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, as an opportunity "to get [your] hands dirty in the codes and hardware of information technology." During the event, the programmers and artists produced a provocative anti-manifesto called 100 Anti-Theses of Cyberfeminism. "Cyberfeminism is not a fragrance," it reads, "not boring... not a single woman... not a picnic... not an artificial intelligence... not lady-like... not mythical."

Cyberfeminism resisted easy definition and, as the manifesto showed, there were multiple iterations and conflicting notions of what it was—and was not. By 1997, the movement was running into trouble. Haraway and Butler's texts had called for the dissolution of gender and racial hierarchies, but it was increasingly clear that cyberfeminism had failed to address race at all.

What's more, the notion that the internet could be employed as a categorically liberated space proved to be too optimistic. It was following the Cyberfeminist International in Kassel that Wilding mounted an important critique of the movement. "The Net is not a utopia of nongender," she wrote in *Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism*. "It is already socially inscribed with regard to bodies, sex, age, economics, social class, and race."

The cyberfeminists, Wilding claimed, had failed to actively interrogate the biases entrenched in cyberspace. "Being bad grrls on the internet is not by itself going to challenge the status quo," she went on. "Cyberfeminism presents itself as inclusive, but the cyberfeminist writings assume an educated, white, upper-middle-class, English speaking, culturally sophisticated readership," Wilding and Maria Fernandez wrote in the book *Domain Errors: Cyberfeminist Practices*.

The movement's advocates may have been bold and brazen, but while purporting to move beyond hierarchal divisions, Wilding felt that they had, unwittingly, reinstated them. She extended her practice to explore the intersection of feminism with other technologies beyond the internet, such as biotechnology—the next frontier for gender discrimination. She founded subRosa, an art collective that critiqued the racial and gender biases in assisted fertility and genetic engineering.

By the 2000s, cyberfeminists had morphed into new forms of feminism. "The narratives around liberation from racism, sexism, and so on in the brave new virtual world were promises that were empty," Barratt of VNS Matrix reflected. "New strategies needed to be developed."

Feminists continue to utilize the web as a crucial tool for connecting women all over the world in order to overcome racial and gender privilege. The Global Feminism movement, for instance, aligns closely with advocates for racial justice in its campaigns for women's rights, while post-colonial feminists like Chela Sandoval have talked of "an internetnetworked global feminism...for women of color who want to connect globally across diasporas." As Wilding conjectured in *Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism*, "But if grrrl energy and invention were to be coupled with engaged political theory and practice... Imagine!"