



**FEMINIST VIRTUAL WORLD ACTIVISM:  
16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE CAMPAIGN,  
GUERRILLA GIRLS BROADBAND, AND SUBROSA**

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**Abstract**

The *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence* campaign, the GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand's calls to action, and subRosa's irony-filled productions are all forms of 21st century feminist activism that occur in physical and virtual space. Physical/virtual spaces pose challenges and potentials for feminist activism. Online social networks offer transitional spaces for challenging dominant culture and developing counterhegemonic discourse by providing options for anonymity and identity projections. Feminist virtual world activism can reach and engage a diverse and vast audience. I review three examples of feminist virtual world activism that enable silenced voices to be heard. Each of the three projects mobilizes global solidarity and provides resources not readily available to most people. Feminist virtual world activism advocates for women to become producers of technology.

In this essay, I review three examples of feminist activism that use different formats: *The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence in Second Life*® (SL), GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand (GGBB), and subRosa. I am drawn to their creative and witty use of visual communication and new media for consciousness-raising. All three groups strategically project masked identities in the virtual world in order to maintain focus on ending the societal oppression of women through their intervention of voice and visual presence. My interest in ending violence against women, workplace discrimination, and consumer deception led me to select these specific cyberfeminist projects for review. While there are other cyberactivist groups including VNS Matrix, Old Boys Network, and Critical Art Ensemble, needed cyberfeminist consortiums are limited.

According to subRosa, "feminist activist art has always involved tactical intervention" (Flanagan et al, 2007, p. 4). I investigate if and how women's online activism in these projects strategically intervene in patriarchal society in order to empower women. My analysis of empowerment through feminist virtual world activism refers to attending to women's agency. In each of these projects, women utilize technology to communicate, to increase social interactions, and engage in and influence the public sphere. I analyze each project for how they are strategically designed and employed to connect local impact to global concerns for a just world.

In both physical and virtual locations, media reinforces behavior that privileges the Western male subject. The dominant voices and viewpoints on the Internet are male (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009; Nakamura, 2003). Women who lack experience using the Internet in an empowering manner may be uncomfortable with this medium, or unfamiliar with its capabilities (Bautista, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, 2007). The Internet and online social networks, such as Second Life,<sup>1</sup> offer unique opportunities for transitional spaces, self-exploration, multiple and silenced voices, and challenging patriarchal society. The personal may also be politicized by collective actions based on shared women's issues including abuse, rape, isolation, abortion, sexuality, marriage, family, and body image (Hanisch, 1969; Hanisch, 2006; Redfern, 2001). However, the Internet can also foster acts of hatred and violence against women and those marginalized

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1. Second Life is a free public 3D virtual world that enables participants to explore and create in virtual space, as well as interact with others via personalized avatars.

in society (Kennedy, 2007). Acts of hate in virtual space can range from intentionally harmful representations and slanderous acts to destructive behavior and interactions. For example, misogynists may verbally attack women/women's organizations by posting negative online comments.

### Cyberfeminism(s) Consciousness-Raising via Visual Communication

Technology is both embraced and strategically resisted by feminists (Fernandez & Wilding, 2002). *Cyberfeminists*, a descriptor founded around the mid-1990s, "investigate the ways in which technology, especially new media and Internet technology, and gender interact" (Flanagan & Looui, 2007, p. 181). A goal of cyberfeminists is to empower women to become active in virtual space by allowing them to experience transformation through participatory actions that directly impacts the transitional spaces where they interact (Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Cyberfeminists "reshape, redefine, and reclaim the new electronic technologies for women" (Bautista, 2003, p. 712).

Similar to feminism, cyberfeminism is a term that lacks a universal definition. There are many diverse feminisms (Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2010; Gill, 2007) and cyberfeminisms (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009). Feminist concepts and strategies are in a state of flux and transform in response to critiques, younger generations, differing struggles, and new ideas (Gill, 2007). The Guerrilla Girls' message is "find your own crazy, creative way to be a feminist and an activist" (Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2010, para. 3). Cyberfeminism aims to include multiple diverse voices and a younger generation of women who may be reluctant to identify as feminists (Fernandez & Wilding, 2002).

Irony and diversity are characteristics of cyberfeminism (Paasonen, 2005). Haraway (1991) describes irony as being both a rhetorical strategy and a political method. By production of activist art in virtual worlds, cyberfeminists intend to disrupt patriarchal societal practices and power structures that oppress and exclude individuals (Keifer-Boyd, 2007; 2009). Tactics of appropriation and intervention are employed by cyberfeminists in order to include women's issues within the dominant

new media discourse. For example, camgirls may politicize their personal via webcam broadcasting (Motter, 2010; Senft, 2008). "The personal is a necessary part of cyberfeminist practice" (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009, p. 4). Cyberfeminists' acts are celebratory, but also challenge the contradictory nature of new media, which provides freedom but also restrictions for women (Flanagan & Looui, 2007; Wilding, 1998). New media impacts and redefines women's experiences (Haraway, 1991).

Cyberart, is art created with digital networking technologies for the virtual world (Colman, 2004), and can be a form of participatory critical democracy (Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Through activist art, which is a form of consciousness-raising, feminists critique and dismantle patriarchal power structures (Flanagan et al, 2007). According to Kennedy (2007), consciousness-raising allows women to realize that they share similar 'personal' issues, and that these issues are really political issues that can be dealt with through collective action.

### 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence

*16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence*, an international campaign, is a collective strategy that aims to end all acts of violence towards women. This campaign derived from the first Women's Global Leadership Institute in 1991, which was sponsored by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. It starts on November 25, International Day Against Violence Against Women, and ends on December 10, International Human Rights Day. The dates of the campaign were strategically selected by participants in order to establish a clear connection between human rights and violence against women (Constantineau, 2009). Campaign goals include consciousness-raising about gender-based violence as a human rights issue, providing strength for local efforts fighting for elimination of violence against women, and forming a stronger bond between local and international work to end violence against women (Constantineau, 2009).

## 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence in Second Life®

Social justice groups in Second Life (SL) strategically intervened in the virtual world by participating in 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence in order to raise consciousness regarding gender-based acts of violence and hatred towards others that violate human rights (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A screenshot of an invitation to join in SL's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence posted on a SL General Discussions Forum.

A venue in SL featured a series of presentations, discussions, and exhibits that focused on international violence against women. Topics from the activist event include anti-slavery and trafficking of women, women's usage of technology for consciousness-raising, and representations of violence towards women in SL (Constantineau, 2009). Consciousness-raising activists' efforts in virtual worlds that attempt to end violence against women can lead to collective action and a collec-

tive solution when shared personal issues are understood to be political in nature and those who care unite and take action in hopes of creating positive socio-cultural change (Hanisch, 1969). One reason for these efforts is that SL virtual projections occasionally duplicate RL domestic violence as a normal and acceptable act. People can even purchase Battle Royale skins that can be worn by female avatars showing black eyes and what appears to be scarred, bloody, and bruised bodies that simulate the bodies of RL victims of domestic violence (Border House, 2010). Ham-like avatars protested the objectification of women and rape role-play in SL Hard Alley (Mistral, 2009).

## Virtual Identity Projections and Acts of Hatred and Violence in Second Life®

Socio-culturally constructed stereotypical representations of women are especially pervasive in mass media, but as a result of feminist efforts, these representations are slowly changing to show female avatars who are independent and confident (Gill, 2007). At the same time, many SL avatars still conform to societal ideals of beauty and sex appeal despite various options of modifying the avatar's appearance to challenge societal norms. At the 2010 International Art Education (InAEA) meeting in SL (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Dace/120/235/319/>) participants witnessed avatars privileged in specific contexts because of their physical appearance. For example, a SL participant felt stereotyped as "new" and othered by his or her avatar's default clothing (see Figure 2). The participant experienced better treatment from others in SL after he or she purchased SL clothing (Keifer-Boyd, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

InAEA participants found that SL mirrors contemporary society. In SL, a Western notion of beauty, including slim female figures, tends to be desirable. Clothing represents economic status and defines the avatar's level of experience. There is a lack of diversity in race, age, (dis)ability, and economic status among avatars, and discrimination is based on avatar appearance (Keifer-Boyd, personal communication, February 4, 2010). There seems to be a re-sexualization of women's bodies in SL



Figure 2. An avatar wearing default clothing. Nakamura (2002) argues that marginalized individuals in physical space, including women, are frequently marginalized in virtual space. The gender of an online participant may be assumed by identifying stereotypical gender-related behavior, as represented in Berman and Bruckman's (2001) study. However, behavior in virtual space does not reveal real world identity. The anonymity that virtual space offers allows for acts of slander, hatred, and violence towards women with limited repercussions when identities are concealed or misrepresented.

### Potentials and Limitations of Activism Against Violence and Hatred in Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds provide a potential venue for community forma-

and in other virtual and public spaces. Women are both self-identifying and being represented as active sexual subjects such as strippers, but not as submissive housewives (Gill, 2007).

While participation in virtual worlds may allow for liberation and multiple identity exploration (Turkle, 1995), there is danger in participation of what Nakamura (2002) refers to as "identity tourism," passing as a race, class, or gender that differs from one's own, because virtual projections are likely to be negative and stereotypical. Nakamura

(2002) argues that marginalized individuals in physical space, including women, are frequently marginalized in virtual space. The gender of an online participant may be assumed by identifying stereotypical gender-related behavior, as represented in Berman and Bruckman's (2001) study. However, behavior in virtual space does not reveal real world identity. The anonymity that virtual space offers allows for acts of slander, hatred, and violence towards women with limited repercussions when identities are concealed or misrepresented. The anonymity that virtual space offers allows for acts of slander, hatred, and violence towards women with limited repercussions when identities are concealed or misrepresented. tion providing anonymity for those who would not participate in sharing intimacies or activist acts in the real world due to fear of embarrassment or consequences of revealing themselves. Global online networks have the ability to connect women all over the world and by participating in global online networks local community groups can learn new tactics from participants around the world and directly apply them to their local situations. However, there is danger in globalizing the local. A limitation of virtual world activism, which has a global impact, is that it is distanced from real local communities and therefore personal issues may be neglected within local communities (Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Acknowledgment and efforts to resolve political as well as personal problems may be disconnected. There is also the possibility of attacks in the virtual and real world against the *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence* campaign and its participants. For example, *griefers*, SL residents who harass others in SL (Linden Research, 2009), send personal attacks via instant messages.

### The Guerrilla Girls

The Guerrilla Girls, a women's activist art group established in 1985, strategically use the names of deceased women artists and wear gorilla outfits in order to conceal their identities (GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand, 2011a). The Guerrilla Girls, known as feminist masked activists, are women artists who work undercover and collectively spread awareness by humorous texts, visuals, and performances in physical and virtual space in order to reveal acts of corruption, sexism, and racism in politics, art, and mass media. The Guerrilla Girls continue to reinvent feminism to meet the needs of the 21st century and change people's perception of the "f" word—*feminism* and understanding of it as a viewpoint on the world (GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand, 2011a). They also aim to expose the hidden, the overlooked, and the oppressive in society. In 2001, the Guerrilla Girls branched off into three activist groups: Guerrilla Girls, Guerrilla Girls On Tour, and GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand (Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2010).

## GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand

Founded by original Guerrilla Girls members, artists of color, and younger generation feminists, GGBB claims to be digitally conscious and provides discourse on taboo subjects including feminism and fashion and discrimination in the technological workplace (see Figure 3). “The Broads” challenge social injustices, sexism, and racism via their political website (<http://ggb.org/>), blog (<http://ggb.org/broad-blog/>), and interactive live activist events (GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand, 2011a). The aim of GGBB is to expand GGBB’s audience and extend their message from the art world to the workplace using new media communication technologies (Mirapaul, 2001). For example, in April 2010, GGBB created a digital mapping project, *Cartographies of Choice*, which identified abortion providers in the United States (GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand, 2011b).



Figure 3. A screenshot of the GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand homepage.

GGBB encourages critical participatory democracy. According to Lee (2007), feminist activism must allow for civic engagement in order for empowerment to occur by the politicization of personal issues. The GGBB website offers free distribution of GGBB’s political materials including downloadable postcards, posters, videos, and screensavers. In

an effort to end workplace discrimination, the public is encouraged to use the e-mail feature offered in *Letters to Bad Bosses* to anonymously send a letter, appropriate for specific instances of discrimination, to workplace offenders (Mirapaul, 2001). The letters include *beauty bias*, *credit hog*, *overtime abuse*, and *diversity discrimination*. The public can also subscribe to an e-mail list to receive updates on GGBB’s projects and activism. Individuals can participate in *Broadblog*, online activities and quizzes, activist projects including dressing up as GGBB members in virtual space, and virtual sit-ins, which intentionally disrupt the function of targeted websites (Mirapaul, 2001).

### Potentials for Empowerment of Women via GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand and Limitations

GGBB’s use of anonymity in virtual space keeps the focus on women’s issues, rather than on the individuals sending the messages. The availability of resources offered on GGBB for free public download strategically aids in spreading the GGBB’s feminist perspectives in the virtual and real world to enact socio-cultural change. For example, *Letters to Bad Bosses* may improve personal local work situations for those who anonymously send them to their employers. Not only does GGBB provide resources for those interested, but it also facilitates connectivity via their blog, which provides women who have Internet access, a venue for global supportive communities. Unfortunately, GGBB is not a useful resource for those who lack Internet access and experience participating in blogs.

Members of GGBB include a younger generation of feminists. They are comprised of at least 50% women who feel marginalized because of their sexual identification or race (GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand, 2008). The anonymity offered in this virtual space allows their voices to be heard. With access to the Internet and confidence with online social networking, GGBB can provide opportunities for empowerment in virtual space that often extend to the real world. According to GGBB, “We reach out and involve a greater and more diverse public in our participatory projects, the web is our natural habitat” (GuerrillaGirlsBroadBand, 2011a, para. 2).

## subRosa

subRosa (<http://www.cyberfeminism.net/>), is a cyberfeminist cell that encourages replication by others, sends critical messages to the public by combining art, activism, and politics (Flanagan et al, 2007). subRosa uses technology as a vehicle for the creation of political art in virtual and physical space that functions as a form of consciousness-raising regarding issues women face in contemporary society (see Figure 4). The artist group's works are research-based and biomedical in nature, and their embodied feminist practice is situational (subRosa, 2009b). New media usage is a tactic employed to simulate ironic plays on reality.



Figure 4. A screenshot of the subRosa homepage.

Technology is used in both the creation and documentation of subRosa's artwork to seduce and engage the audience, while raising contemporary gender-related issues. The artists' hope that by raising these issues in physical and virtual space via new media, others will pursue further actions in relation to their causes. subRosa believes that the transformative power of activist art increases within societies that continue to be controlling and oppressive (Flanagan et al, 2007) and that the freedom and flexibility of representation, behavior, and interactions that the

Internet allows provides additional opportunities for transformation and empowerment of self and others.

subRosa utilizes a variety of new media in their performances to capture the attention of the audience and develop their agency. They (2002b) refer to their performances as "situational information theater." subRosa (2002b) states, "We consciously politicize and problematize both the content and form of our work and social relations as they are mediated by digital technologies" (p. 4). They hope to unveil deceptions of corporations and misconceptions by influencing the public to view new technologies through an informed lens (subRosa, 2002b).

In their performance-based exhibitions, subRosa critiques how new technologies impact women's bodies, lives, and occupation and exposes the gendered and raced impacts of biotechnology. According to subRosa (2002b), "many of them [women] are struggling with ways to both resist and use the power of these technologies" (p.1). They argue that the biotech industry is consumer driven and implications of their products uses are not clearly revealed nor understood, which is why subRosa directs attention to the potential long-term biological and environmental impact. "There must be ways of slowing down the rapid deployment of largely untested and uncontrolled dissemination of biotechnological, genetic, and transgenic experimentation in the global environment" (subRosa, 2002b, p. 2). They emphasize that women should have an input in the creation and use of assisted reproductive technologies.

They (2002b) state, "We now face a situation in which women's bodies have become the sites of new rationalized and eugenic bio genetic reproductive and medical procedures which represent a potentially even greater and more subtle colonization of women's bodies than ever before" (p. 5).

subRosa's *Expo EmmaGenics* (2001) exemplifies usage of technology-enhanced activist art in virtual and physical space. This was a biotech tradeshow project that took place at Intermediale Festival: Art Happens! in Mainz, Germany in 2001. For this performance, subRosa used commercial marketing tactics that persuaded women consumers to purchase assisted reproductive technologies (subRosa, 2002b). The three-hour commercial performance consisted of diverse types of advanced

reproductive technology products made by United States' corporations for European purchase, including *Human Caviar*, *Zygote Monitors*, and the *Palm Pilot XY*. The performance featured *MarthaArt* a witty video that demonstrates the correct use of these new reproductive technological devices (subRosa, 2009a). subRosa insists that resistance, critique, and public awareness are necessary in order to develop an understanding of the processes and impact of advanced reproductive and genetic technologies.

subRosa also created *Expo EmmaGenics* (<http://www.cmu.edu/emmagenics/home/>), a prank conference website (see Figure 5). This activist artwork features a list of presenters and conference themes, expert advice, and a shop with products for the biotech community. The fictional conference organizers argue that their purpose is to commend and support women's contributions to the DNA data pool and fertility industry, yet information is provided that indicates that the corporations are dominated by men (Flanagan & Looui, 2007).



Figure 5. A screenshot of the Expo EmmaGenics homepage.

### *Potentials and Limitations of subRosa's Activist Art*

subRosa (2002b) states, "We found this strategy of using various registers of irony and truth-value in our [subRosa's] performances to be generative of criticality" (p. 8). subRosa furthers the concept of "Internet art" to also be considered informative art that exposes the oppressive potential of new technologies (Flanagan & Looui, 2007). Participants/performers of subRosa's situational information theater are strategically pressured to make ethical choices through and regarding electronic media (subRosa, 2002b). The limitation to irony usage is that an educated well-informed audience is assumed. However, everyone may not understand these clever messages, and instead either be confused by this form of activism or misinterpret the messages entirely.

Physical location and technology access limits subRosa's audience outreach. Those who may not be able to attend their performances in person, which are typically held at privileged locations such as universities and convention centers, can visit their project websites online, if they have access to the Internet. The majority of women who have access to the Internet are White, middle-class and upper-class, educated, and living in urban or suburban areas (Bautista, 2003). Those women without Internet access or who cannot attend the interventions because of distance or other issues are excluded, and exposure to counterhegemonic messages and forms of feminist activism is likely limited.

### **Inspired to Participate**

Despite limitations, the Internet is a virtual space where feminists infiltrate informal learning environments using communication technologies that were intended for control in order to maintain a hierarchical society (Keifer-Boyd, 2007). Online social networking may create solidarity for women globally (Bautista, 2003) and potentially lead to positive socio-cultural change, if women engage in critical and empowering online actions. Therefore, the impact that feminists have in virtual worlds should not be overlooked, particularly because women are becoming the majority of online social network participants (Berman, 2009), and

pedagogical tactics should continue to be explored in physical and virtual spaces.

I support subRosa's call for new forms of feminist coalitions in virtual space. According to subRosa (2002b), "Cyberfeminists need to develop contestational strategies for critical uses of new technologies, and create new forms of activist networks and feminist coalitions" (p. 1). Feminist activism in virtual space, which is a form of public pedagogy, influences online social capital and extends to impact behavior in the real world (Keifer-Boyd, 2009). The activists acknowledged in this article utilize new media in order to facilitate global consciousness-raising, connectivity, and empowerment of women through visibility and voice. Their efforts have inspired my own online feminist activism.

I guide women's creation of meaningful experience-based postcard art (see Figure 6) and publically display their work via blogs (see <http://womensissuepostcards.blogspot.com/> and <http://womensexperiences.blogspot.com/>). My intent is to politicize women's personal experiences by posting women's experience-based postcard art on the Web where they can potentially have the most exposure and impact. I invite the public to carry on the conversation by contributing activist art to my blogs. Like the activists discussed in this article, I also aim to increase women's visual and verbal contributions to virtual world discourse through my online interventions. Strategic local resistance to patriarchal practices that is supported by a global community is too powerful to be ignored (Amani, 2009).



Figure 6. A visual response to the prompt: "What does The Global War Against Women mean to you?"

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