

cyberlabia

gendered thoughts & conversations on cyberspace

un proyecto de praba pilar



Cyber.Labia: Gendered Thoughts & Conversations On Cyberspace

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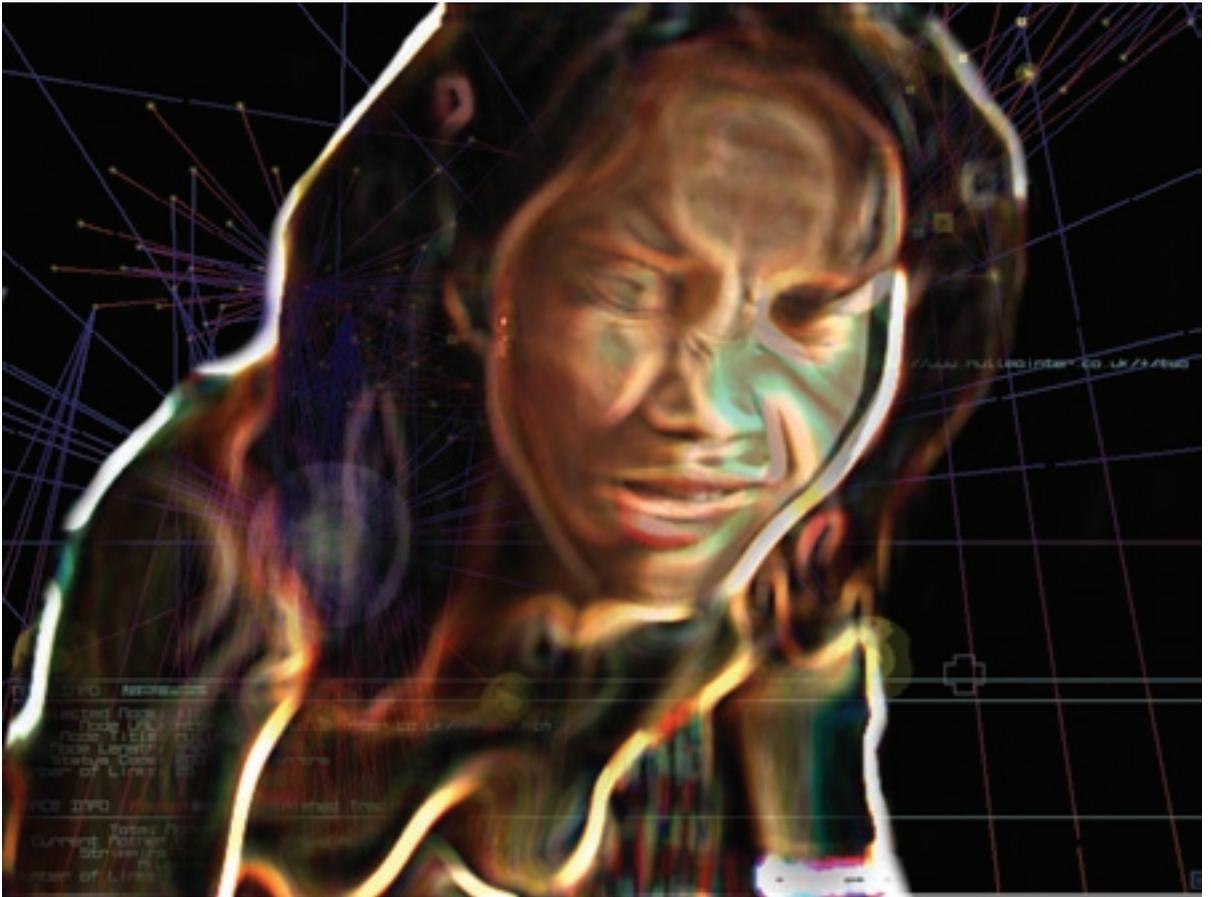
praba pilar
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Cover Image: Cyberlabia #1, digital print. Praba Pilar, 2005

C y b e r . l a b i a : **G e n d e r e d T h o u g h t s &** **C o n v e r s a t i o n s o n C y b e r s p a c e** **b y P r a b a P i l a r**

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cyberlabia #3, digital print

praba pilar, 2005

cyber: redes informaticas de comunicacion (Larousse)
translation: information web for communication

labia: facilidad para hablar con gracia (larousse)
translation: ability to speak with grace

Cyber.labia. by Praba Pilar

When I was a child growing up in Mexico City, my father would disappear for extended trips to Taiwan. When he returned he always had toys for me - funny looking creatures that looked like plastic spiders with metal prongs and legs coming out of them. Boards with all kinds of metal connections and wiring. I would play with these as other girls played with dolls. We had thousands of them spilling out of overflowing cardboard boxes all over the house, small plastic bags with the tiny creatures with their pointy metal legs clattering up our hallways and our rooms. Little did I know my father was smuggling in the future, and that the computer components he was importing would soon be taking over the world.

components...bit...byte...processor...coding...programming...network...internet...web...domain...
cyberworld...cyborg...hacking...hybrid...matter...space...time...the language of my childhood.

My father went broke on his computer empire, eventually moving our Colombian family from the center of Mexico to a hot dusty border town - we got poorer and poorer while he pursued his wild vision. Here finally, in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico/Laredo, Texas he would establish his global empire, which would, one day, "take down IBM." Those were tall orders, unimaginable, and he never quite got it off.

My much more rational mother eventually evacuated us to New York City, where she could find work and we could get on beyond the doomed and sad dreams of my father. I forgot about my early connection to the cyberworld until I started making fun of the cyber BOOM of the 1990's through performances, interventions, writing and other antics.

From 1999 through 2002, I collaboratively produced performances on surveillance, the global war machine, and the humaquina with *Los Cybrids: La Raza Techno-Critica*. At the end of that cycle,

I felt we hadn't really looked at questions related specifically to women, and checked in with the dialogue around women and information and communications technologies and cyberspace. I found so many nitty gritty aspects of gender overlooked and buried under abstractions of cyber theorists or academic postulations of cyberfeminists. Increasingly, I wanted to hear concretely about the place of women in the cyberworld right now.

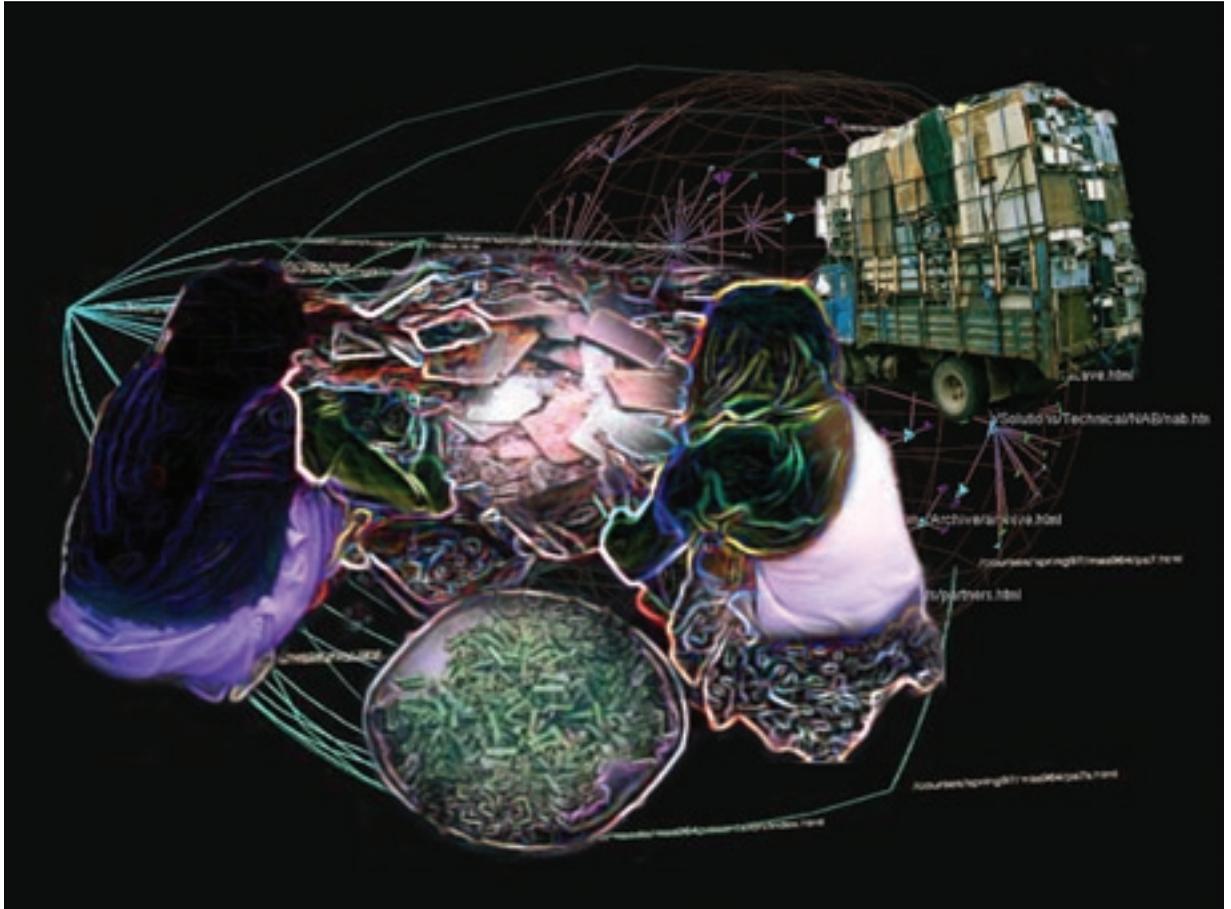
In this context I developed a new performance in 2004, titled *Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend*. The performance had its world premiere at Studio XX, the premiere digital space for women in Montreal. It then toured to the LAB in San Francisco, the *Cyber Imaginaries* Conference of *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* in Seattle, and the State University of New York in Albany.

In this performance I tried to get beyond superficial cries of the cyborgian revolution and examine the real impacts computers are having on women. I explored the contradictions between the hyperbolic rhetoric of the computer industry and factual realities on the lives of women, countering the sexiness of the computer industry by disrobing the truth of the exportation of toxic electronic waste to Asia, of net based gyno-slavery, of telesexuality, Real Dolls and other extraordinary effects of the computer revolution on the female subject. Appropriating the theme song *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend* from the 1953 musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, my performance introduced the glamorous Digital Diva with song and dance interspersed with monologues, and audio of interviews with feminist cyber workers.

Here in the pages of my book, *Cyber.Labia*, I've put all this work together. I've included my essay written for *Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend* (based on reports from the United Nations, labor groups and activists in the field) along with the satiric song from the performance on the accompanying DVD, with the lyrics so one can sing along.

For this book I've included the interviews I conducted over 2004/2005 with: Anne Balsamo, feminist, academic, technologist, founder of Onomy Labs and author of *Technologies of the Gendered Body*; Paulina Borsook, cyberworker and author of *Cyberselfish/A Critical Romp through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High-Tech* and the forthcoming *Wired for Sex: An Illustrated Guide to Sex, Technology, and the Way We Live Today*; Sheila Davis, cyberworker and Director of the Clean Computer Campaign of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition; and Art McGee, cyberworker, co-founder of the Media Justice Network and father of "black" or "Pan-African" cyberspace. *Cyber.Labia* also presents images from my *Cyber.Labia* series, which are in part made up of images from the online and offline cyberworld layered over maps representing the geography of internet usage.

Spring, 2005
Oakland, California



cyberlabia #7, digital print
Internet geography maps by Ben Fry and Silicon Graphics.

praba pilar, 2005

Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend, by *Praba Pilar*

I was driving through the gritty streets of East Oakland in 2003, trying to find a cheap radiologist I'd been referred to for a mammogram when I heard a man over the radio talking about Marilyn Monroe, the diamond industry, and seedy cover ups. Altogether it sounded like a snow job I'd been exposed to again and again.

acquire, update, upgrade, upload, download, unload, and reload.

He was talking about the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. I saw it when I was around 12 years old, ogling the impossibly platinum Marilyn Monroe with her oozing femininity and her raunchy glamour as she chased the ugly old man who gave her the most beautiful of diamonds. And yes, as a young girl, I sang along with the theme song, *Diamonds are A Girl's Best Friend*, coupling diamonds and women forever in my young mind.

I'll never know who was on the radio that day, but he led me to Edward Jay Epstein's book, *The Rise and Fall of the Diamond*, and what he lays out piqued my interest. Epstein describes how the De Beers diamond cartel of South Africa helped finance films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as part of a finely orchestrated campaign to drive up demand for diamonds. De Beers's advertising agency came up with a strategy in the 1930's to exploit what was then the 'exciting new medium' of motion pictures. The agency contacted writers and directors to arrange for scenes and songs featuring diamonds to be inserted into films. De Beers also gave diamonds away to hot celebrities, as 'symbols of indestructible love' that would spur further sales.

De Beers' advertising campaign had many fronts, and they were very successful at driving up demand in a very short time - just between 1938 and 1941, diamond sales went up 55 percent. By 1980, sales had gone from \$23 million in 1939 to over \$2 billion.

This put me in mind of the personal computer industry, and the hyped up hoopla I've been spoonfed over the whole arc of the personal computer boom. For years I've heard the relentless chants of the heralds of the information revolution - acquire, update, upgrade, upload, download, unload, reload. Apple and Microsoft promised a revolution in all senses of our lives, born of a computer in every home. It was a good strategy for moving product, and moving product is what they did. In tempo with the breathless incantations of the glory of the information

computer manufacturing has created its own oceans of toxicity

revolution, hundreds of millions of personal computers were sold within the United States over the last five years.

Diamonds have always been marketed as cool, smooth, impeccable gems, appearing in very glamorous or romantic settings. Underlying these fancy rocks are grossly oppressive conditions under which diamonds are mined and cut. Much of the mining work is unhealthy, unsafe and dangerous. Many of the countries where diamonds are extracted end up poor. Consumers don't

know a thing about the diamond cutting industry, which employs children in slave conditions. Consumers never get a glimpse of the conflict diamonds imbroglio that European diamond traders play along with.

Like the ugly and well hidden mining secrets of the diamond industry, computer manufacturing has created its own oceans of toxicity.

Silicon Valley, birthplace of the electronics industry, now has twenty nine Super Fund sites and 150 groundwater contamination sites. The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition warns that electronic waste is the most rapidly growing waste problem in the world. Toxic ingredients such as lead, beryllium, mercury, cadmium and brominated flame retardants are being exported from the First World to the Third for disposal. These e-waste operations in the Third World are extremely polluting and damaging to health through exposing workers and their children to toxic solvents, the open burning of plastic waste, river dumping of acids and wide spread general dumping.

There's a funny thing about diamond rings. Contrary to the hype of the Diamonds Are Forever campaign, diamond jewelry has very little resale value, another

The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition warns that electronic waste is the most rapidly growing waste problem in the world.

parallel with personal computers with their 18 month life cycles. By 2004 the US had over 315 million obsolete computers. Even worse, the International Association of Electronics Recyclers noted in its 2004 report that about one billion units of computer equipment will be trashed between 2004 and 2010.

Then there's the whole women's liberation shtick I remember hearing about.

Computers were going to take us beyond gender and free us up. Well, things are not really quite like that in the information technology age. It's like that old saying, 'la misma mierda, diferente olor.' (same old shit, different odor.) The fact is, women's work with computers is concentrated in clerical work. United Nations and Agency for International Development reports show that women are employed in end user, lower skilled information technology jobs related to word processing or data entry and make up small percentages of managerial, maintenance, and design personnel in networks operating systems or software. Very few women are actually producers of information technology, whether as Internet content providers, programmers, designers, inventors or fixers of computers.

Women are absent from decision making structures: from the boards and senior management of private IT companies; from senior management and advisors of policy and regulatory organizations such as the International Telecommunication Union, the World Trade Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization; from technical standards setting organizations, industry and professional organizations such as the internet society, national policy and regulatory organizations; and from international development organizations and agencies. Looking at the bigger picture, information technology greatly facilitates the transfer of goods, services and

finance around the world, thereby facilitating globalization - a process that has been none too kind to women worldwide.

*one billion units of computer equipment
will be trashed between 2004 and 2010*

What about the Internet and the Web?

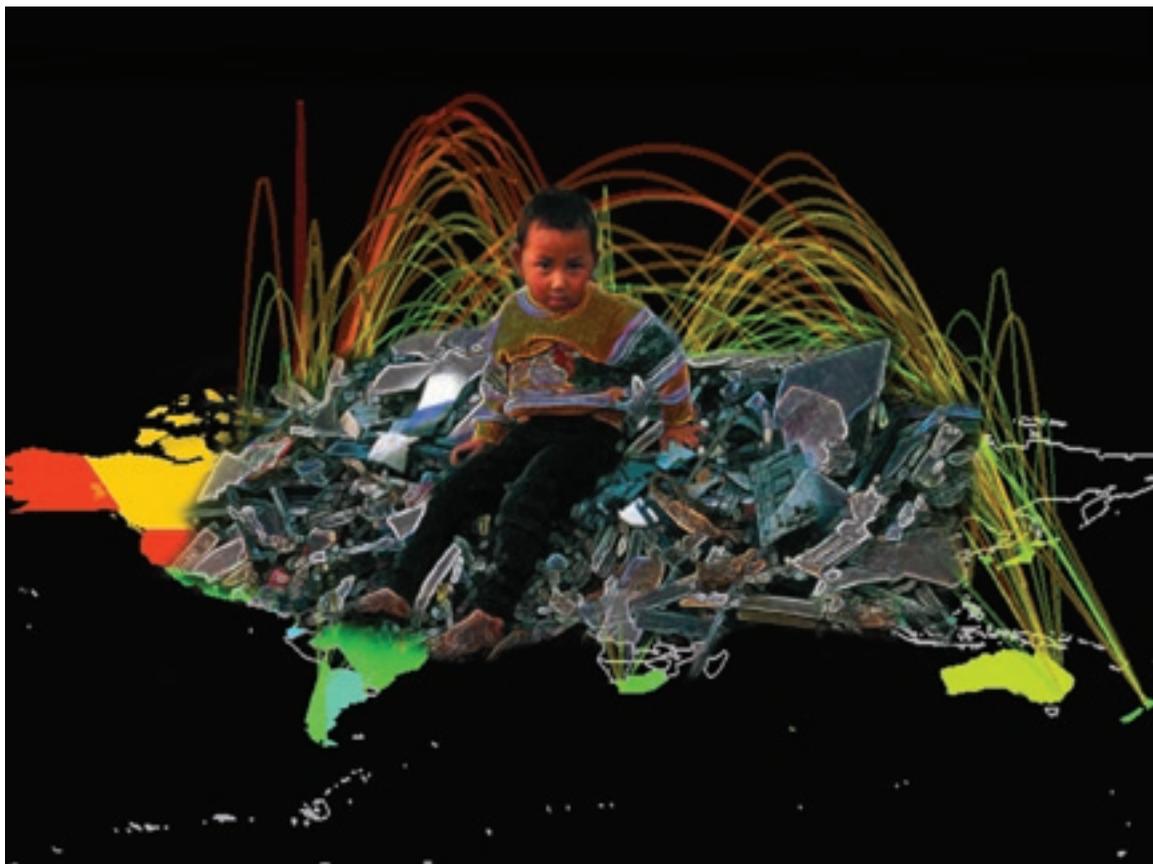
Isn't that the level playing field we've been dreaming of? Can't we be equal, free from the bias surrounding race, class and gender? Free from ever present patriarchy? In much of the world, women lack access to literacy and education, making up nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterate. One out of every two women in developing countries is illiterate. One needs basic literacy and basic numeracy in order to write or read emails, to navigate the Internet, or surf the World Wide Web. Women lack the time to learn and operate the equipment, and lack the money to pay for it, while they often are prevented access to community centers by cultural and social norms. Most women around the world don't speak the primary language of information technology: English. Reports keep coming out of the United Nations pointing out that poverty, and lack of literacy, education, healthcare, and employment are still prominent in the lives of women around the world. These are not being addressed nor solved by our current formulation of information and communications technologies.

Furthermore, the web is being used in various ways as a tool in the prostitution of women, with global sex syndicates recruiting women from all over the globe. Womenspace.org has posted reports on how pimps now use the web to stalk, sell and exploit women, enabling sex tourism and the meeting of mail order brides. There is increased trafficking of women online, a further globalization of the sex trade, with the use of this communications tool for sexual exploitation. In some ways this emerging ubiquitous cybersexuality leads to a divorce away from copulation and the corporeal into a telesexuality and telerelating that isn't going to improve the status of women around the world. If anything, it seems that more visible forms of subjugation of women are proliferated through readily available pornographic sites.

*en-abled to consume but dis-abled to create,
disseminate and control the technology*

With women shut out of the power centers of this technological shift, we will be en-abled to consume but dis-abled to create, disseminate and control the technology. We will be dis-abled to create alternatives to current status quo of environmental damages caused by the manufacturing, consumption and disposal of computers and the hazardous e-waste dumping in the Third World.

If so, then perhaps computers, like diamonds, will turn out not to be a girl's best friend.



*cyberlabia #8, digital print
Internet geography map by Stephen G. Eick.*

praba pilar, 2005

Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend



Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend
lyrics, Praba Pilar
sung to the tune of Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend

**They say us girls will die for love
and swoon for a man's erection
Girl, I just say to hell with men
Give me wireless connection
A kiss on the lips may be quite elemental
but Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend.**

**A kiss can be bland, and it won't pay the rental
for a new laptop, or help you with a web cam pop
Men grow cold as girls grow old
and he can't get it up in the end.**

**But on sound cards and desktops
hard drives don't lose their props
Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend
... DELL ... Microsoft ... Xe-Rox...Hewlett Packard...
Talk to me, Fiona, tell me all about it!**

**There may come a time when a gal needs a cover
CComputers Are A Girl's Best Friend.
There may be some cheating you need to uncover,
it's your behind, spying is fine when you're online.**

**Download music and cable shows
but beware when cyber cops descend,
Just send on those louses straight back to their mouses
Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend.**

**I've heard of a life before HTTP
Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend.
I've heard of a time before T1 lines, or cable
Tell you right now, just the thought of that makes me unstable**

**Time rolls on and youth is gone
and you can't straighten up when you sleep
but stiff wrists or stiff necks
are worth being a wreck**

**Computers... Computers...
I don't mean the users
but Computers,
Are A Girl's Best
Best Friend.**

Conversation: Anne Balsamo with Praba Pilar

January 11, 2004

Anne Balsamo's research investigates the relationship between culture and technology. Her first book, Technologies of the Gendered Body (Duke UP) examined the gendered implications of emergent bio-technologies. She is working on a new book called Designing Culture: A work of the Technological Imagination that investigates the reproductive qualities of new media technologies. She is a former research scientist and member of the RED group at Xerox PARC. Currently she is the President of Onomy Labs, a Silicon Valley start-up that builds cultural technologies. She is also a professor in Gender Studies and Interactive Media at the University of Southern California and director of academic programs for the Annenberg Center's Institute of Multimedia Literacy in Los Angeles.

I wanted to talk to Balsamo about the variance between the promises of the information revolution and the realities being found out in the field, and we met over drinks at the Luxembourg Bar in San Francisco. She laid out the historical context of gender stratification, the tactical use of the rhetoric of democracy to promote the sales of products, ultimately pointing out how "patriarchy is not a technological phenomenon - patriarchy uses technology to reproduce itself."

GENDERING OF TECHNOLOGY

PILAR: The evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) promised to introduce sustainable, gender-friendly policies giving women access to education, skills-training, and decent jobs at all levels of the sector. But in 2003, the Commission on the Status of Women noted that what they were finding is women concentrated in lower-paid jobs at the bottom of the occupational scale in data entry, call-handling, teleworking, customer service centers or in electronics assembly plants working under sweat shop conditions, devoid of job security, income security and social protections. Doesn't it seem that information revolution - as it eliminates the jobs women were performing or puts them in new jobs under harsh conditions and low pay - is further marginalizing women and disempowering them?

BALSAMO: What is playing out with respect to information and communication technologies is actually a very old and familiar historical kind of phenomenon. It happens over and over and over again across the spectrum of technologies.

One example is the debate between physicians and midwives at a time when physicians were not yet professionalized and there was a gendered labor distinction - for instance physicians who could belong to the Royal College of Science were mostly men, midwives were mostly women and, during the 16th and 17th century, physicians and midwives were equally vested with the authority to aid the birth process of women. Then men became part of a professional society, and you get the Royal College Of Physicians and so on happening. They set up a set of credentials including the stipulation that the only birth practitioners who could use technology like forceps, (a new technology at the time), were those who were credentialed as physicians, who therefore could only be men. Sure enough what happens is then you get the economic stratification of

these professions. Men use technology as a platform for getting more money and elevating the cost and value of their services.

They say now they can aid the birth situation with the use of these new technologies, e.g. forceps, so therefore they should be paid more because they are professionals, they have a credentialing system, and they have technology on their side. They forbid women who are operating as midwives from credentialing themselves, from operating and from joining the same kind of associations and you see an economic stratification. Women's work is devalued and not paid as well. After a while you see another kind of stratification - the midwives develop their own set of technologies, techniques, medical protocols and so on. You see that the technology that gets used by women does not have the same impact of elevating their professional status, justifying higher wages, or justifying more value for their services.

PILAR: I did a study in the eighties on women and work in Soviet society, and found that the relationship of the status and pay that went with certain professions changed as women entered previously male identified fields, and vice versa. When women entered the professions of engineering and medicine, these professions were devalued, with a decrease in status and pay. As men entered teaching and nursing, these professions were revalued, with an increase in status and pay.

BALSAMO: Well, in some respects that happened in the US too. Some people have argued that the increased clout that nurses have gained in the US has been because of the entry of men into those professions. India has had a much longer tradition than the US of educating women in science and math in the early grades and then admitting them and encouraging them to go into science and engineering careers. The technical and scientific professions in India and nowhere near as gender stratified as they are in the US. However, there were other ways in which the gender stratification played itself out - at a site yet removed. Both men and women were encouraged to be engineers, but where they could do their engineering ended up being subtly gendered, so engineering in civil situations was an appropriate for women, whereas the nuclear and aerospace engineering field were considered the engineering fields that men should go into.

MYTHOLOGY, DEMOCRACY AND PUSHING PRODUCT

PILAR: We live under a mythology of a technological fix, that finally a technology will emerge that will help us overcome injustice. With information and communications technologies, the internet, the web - the hype has been that this will finally overcome racism, sexism, and ageism, leading to democratic equality.

BALSAMO: That's certainly part of the hype of every new technology. Whether it foregrounds gender or not, we're told that this will be the technology that delivers us into democracy, provides every citizen a voice, and revolutionizes education.

PILAR: Radio was supposed to do it, television was supposed to do it. Within the hype bubble even feminists get lost from the reality that technology is designed and run by humans, and the humans haven't changed just because we have a couple of new gadgets - gadgets that ironically

serve the military more than anyone else.

BALSAMO: It's an analytical confusion that happens when you don't take a historical perspective. When you see something happening like the devaluing and deskilling of women so that they get concentrated at the lower levels and you don't see that that has happened over and over again, you get confused that this is an issue of technology. It's an issue of the social structure, of patriarchy, and patriarchy is not a technological phenomenon. Patriarchy uses technology to reproduce itself.

PILAR: That's an important issue that gets befuddled. The Indian physicist Vandana Shiva describes the Global North's approach to science and technologies as leading to systems of knowledge and technology based on a particular culture, class and gender that are foisted on the Global South. Shiva argues that these systems are not universal, and that specifically because they emerge from a dominating and colonizing culture, they are themselves colonizing. The befuddlement lies in the misguided belief that the way to overcome patriarchy and other forms of injustice will be through these very same technological fixes.

BALSAMO: That too is a long mythology. We get into these technological messes and the only way out of them is more technology so we develop technologies that will clean us up and will save us from ourselves. You get these multiple kinds of myths going on the same path where the answer is always technology. I don't know that we're asking the right question if that's the answer.

PILAR: We're seeing the development of global information and communication structures with government monopolies and a few immense corporations controlling the world's telecommunication flows, while dominating the world's mass media. If we want to look to technology to save

The marketing arm of the high tech Silicon Valley based technology industry has totally glommed onto the power of the rhetoric of democracy and has promoted all of these devices, as somehow aiding the process of democratic participation.

us, it sure as hell isn't going to be through military-government monopolies and corporations which have no interest whatsoever in saving us.

BALSAMO: In fact, their interest is in consolidating their own power.

PILAR: They want to consume us!

BALSAMO: That's right, In fact that's why people are called human resources in corporate discourse, we are resources for the corporation in a real material, consumptive sense.

But I want to go back to Vandana Shiva. When she says the inappropriateness of modern western

knowledge and technologies for the Global South, it's like, absolutely, but that only makes sense if you think of technology in a monolithic way. The way I've been trying to argue that we should think about technology is that what comes under the banner of technology is a cultural construct and that cultural construct changes over time and over place. There is something that we can call US centric based technology and western knowledge, but US technology is not technology, there is no such thing as an abstract notion of technology. What technology is is always determined by the cultural context and the geopolitical situation. Therefore, she's right to say that the importation of one sense of technology and one definition of technology to another cultural context of course is going to fail.

PILAR: The scale of intervention of these technologies in every day life is resulting in a culture of compliance, where the technology itself becomes an agent of social control. With the kind of things happening under the banner of the "War on Terrorism," there's more and more control and less and less access to information.

BALSAMO: In a patriarchal sense, the first goal of power is to consolidate your power. That's going on across domains in the US and it's having intense and wide scale global effects. The consolidation of power in the US government, in terms of the kinds of rights they are rescinding, and the kinds of impositions and laws that they are institutionalizing, all those laws are about the consolidation of government power. The concentration of media outlet ownership in the hands of a few corporate agents is about the consolidation of media power in the hands of the few, both of those are just huge threats to any kind of sense of individual liberty. It's individual liberties that are under great threat, by these kinds of concentrations of governmental and media power.

PILAR: Part of the mythology of global communications is that it's inherently democratic, because you can open up access to the inputs and outputs. This has not proven true given the digital, racial and class divide around the world - there are persistent issues of access. Women make up two thirds of the world's illiterate. Most of the Internet is still in English. It's inaccessible - what's democratic about that?

BALSAMO: What the agents that are populating this myth are doing is latching on to the rhetoric of democracy because democracy as a rhetorical device, as a concept, has a lot of positive social veillance. Who in the US doesn't want to be on the side of democracy and the democratization of human existence. No one could argue with that. It's a classic ideological move - you claim what you're doing under the term that no one could disagree with. The work of ideology is to obfuscate, to promote the rhetoric in lieu of an explanation or a discussion of the reality. That's a classic ideological situation. That's exactly what's going on in the newspaper discussions about the social value of the Internet, and the advertisements for all of the technologies in and around the Internet.

PILAR: The industry has successfully commodified and appropriated the whole discussion of democracy in order to sell machines - a computer in every pot, as Los Cybrids used to say.

BALSAMO: That's absolutely true, that's exactly what's going on. The marketing arm of the

high tech Silicon Valley based technology industry has totally glommed onto the power of the rhetoric of democracy and has promoted all of these devices, from the most insignificant to the most elaborate, as somehow aiding the process of democratic participation. Interestingly, women are a target market for this, in terms of them being a category of consumers. There's an interesting shift, where the rhetoric of democracy often gets invoked as it's not that its going to allow you to sit up and make your vote as a citizen, but that these technologies allow you to come forward and consume in the same way that everyone else consumes.

One viable response is to try to argue for radical democracy. If the people who are promoting, rationalizing or selling these technologies want to say this will aid democracy, a strategy to deal with it is to take them at their word, and say, "oh, ok, democracy, ok - that means radical democracy, that means one person, one vote, one chicken in every pot, one T-1 line in every house."

ACCESS AND FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS

PILAR: Another question about women's access to the Internet is that it's a text format and both text and context-text based and contextual literacy are limited.

BALSAMO: That issue of text based literacy and context literacy is an issue not only for discussions about women's access to the Internet in the United States but throughout the world. Text based literacy, especially text based literacy in English, cannot be assumed anywhere else in the world

At the center of feminist engagement of global technologies is the concept of appropriate technologies, and one of the most appropriate technologies for feminist aims is good old-fashioned community based radio. Now, radio is high tech for many situations and in a historical era it was cutting edge communications technology. Radio is a powerful means of dissemination of information for women, and does not require textual or visual literacy. All it requires is multi lingual broadcasting and the infrastructure of a radio broadcast situation. That infrastructure is capital intensive, but when you think about where you are going to put your efforts as a feminist, to develop new technologies, the dollar per dollar investment that you would make in a radio set up vs. wiring a school, you'd be better off to do a radio station. One of the things that all new media producers should develop, as they develop their digital CD ROMS, their applications and so on, they should always develop an audio version that could be disseminated throughout these radio networks.

PILAR: I've used the radio a lot as an activist. When I worked with the Hexterminators, the group of Super Heroes fighting biotech corporate greed, we tried to include a radio component in every one of our direct actions. We found it a very powerful way to get information out. With Los Cybrids, we often did satirical shows on the radio, and the call in responses showed us how much people resonated with our work. But this is an area that we're seeing incredible corporate consolidation across the United States, so that there's less and less independent radio, and there's more and more radio that's owned by Clear Channel.

BALSAMO: The kind of situation that we're seeing is part and parcel of the consolidation of

power among media channels and media owners. I was thinking about the global situation where that consolidation has not happened with radio frequency regulation to the same extent that it has in the US.

PILAR: How do you think social critics can think more creatively about how to use new media for different ends?

BALSAMO: We need to think more complexly about technology in the broadest sense, digital technologies in a more narrow sense, and new media in another narrow sense. The technologies of digital reproduction, of biological reproduction, any of those technologies are a collection of devices that have embedded in them privileged forms of knowledge. They enact certain world views, they carry with them social values, they enable certain practices and disable other practices, they are both constraining, in terms of limitations they set up, they are used in certain institutional settings that discipline their use, that grant privilege around their use, they also make things possible that were never possible before. The notion of technology is that it is both determining, both because of the technology in its device form and the institutions that structure the use of that technology, and technologies are all expressive, they can all be used in ways that were not intended, and that has good and bad consequences.

One of the things that all new media producers should develop, as they develop their digital CD ROMS, their applications and so on, they should always develop an audio version that could be disseminated throughout radio networks

PILAR: Just like the development of web based internet activism like floodnet, which crashed targeted websites, or the Zapatista use of the Internet.

BALSAMO: We need to understand that these technologies have determining effects. You have this collective agent, the corporation, the government, the state, with a lot of consolidated power, getting to determine how this technology is used, by setting up the institutional structure. Then you have all these individual users who may be just one person struggling against. It's just an uneven balance of agency but that's what it's about, that struggle, and that one person will meet together with another person, and then there'll be two people, and those two people will be a five person collective, and that five person collective will be a twenty person movement, that's the only hopeful dynamic we have about social change.



cyberlabia #6, digital print
Internet geography map by Stephen G. Eick.

praba pilar, 2005

Interview with Sheila Davis, by Praba Pilar

January 7, 2004

*The **Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition** has shown that the manufacturers of the instruments of the information revolution use dangerous chemicals, significantly deplete natural resources and cause terrible damages to human health and the environment.*

*I went to visit **Sheila Davis**, Project Director of their **Computer Take Back** campaign, to talk about computers, recycling, and the environment. Davis has worked on electronic recycling and environmental sustainability issues since 1996. While Community Development Director for Materials for the Future Foundation (MFF,) Davis worked to integrate environmental and community economic development goals, implemented the first curbside residential collection pilot program for electronic waste and was instrumental in implementing a ban on televisions and computer monitors from California municipal landfills.*

Davis explained how the very notion of computer recycling gives us the comforting idea that something responsible is being done with junked computers, while in actuality, computer recycling operations are extremely toxic and the recyclers are exporting hazardous wastes from the First World to the Third. She points out that consumers and governments need to demand a revamping of the design and manufacturing process and not just “ship it overseas”.

PILAR: How is the recycling of computers damaging to human health and the environment?

DAVIS: Computers contain over seven hundred different kinds of chemicals, most of them hazardous and toxic. The way you recycle the materials is really important - if you don't process them properly, then you expose humans and the environment to hazardous waste. Exposures include the products being shipped overseas to China for recycling, where they are not properly handled because people don't have the facilities to do so. Whole villages participate in taking apart the computers, and that means women, children, everyone.

Inside the computers and the monitors is glass with lead in it, the integrated circuit boards have cadmium and barium, the cathode ray tubes have lead oxide and barium, the switches and flat screens have mercury, the cables, casing and printed circuit boards have brominated flame retardants, and a host of other chemicals, and people handle these products in very frightening ways. In order to retrieve the gold from the boards people burn them in open pits or they dip them in acid baths and then they have no way to dispose of the acids or the water properly so they dump them in the rivers. With the glass, there's really no market for it, so people basically crush it by hand and are exposed to lead or they burn the material, which lets off dioxins. Whole village ecologies have basically been ruined by recycling electronics.

PILAR: How common is this?

DAVIS: It's common in China, India, Pakistan and Africa, which is where the material is being exported to for recycling. One of the biggest problems is there's really not a lot of due diligence

so large companies, public institutions and large universities all send their material overseas and they don't know what happens to it once it gets there. They're basically exporting hazardous waste.

Whole village ecologies have basically been ruined by recycling electronics.

PILAR: How is this affecting the health of women?

DAVIS: Women are just as involved in burning and pulling apart boards and taking some of the smaller chips and more valuable components off of the boards. It affects women's health in ways that it would not affect men's health in terms of birth defects and cancers. A recent study showed that the hair samples of people in the region where they're burning these material have almost fifty times more toxins because they're exposed to so many dioxins, especially brominated flame retardants.

Brominated flame retardants are put in the housing of the computer and on the boards so that the computers don't immediately explode and burn in a fire. In that sense they're very important in trying to protect human health and fire safety. However, the exposure is really astronomical - they accumulate in the fatty tissue of our bodies, they're in our breasts and getting into our breast milk - several studies indicate that really high levels of flame retardant are in our breast milk.

PILAR: That seems particularly dangerous for women and infants.

DAVIS: That's a particularly poignant area for most people when your breast milk is contaminated so the first thing when you enter the world and you suck on your mothers breast you're sucking on flame retardants. That hits people where they understand it.

PILAR: Are there contaminants at the beginning of the life cycle?

DAVIS: There are hundreds of chemicals in a computer, which means somebody's exposed to them in putting these things together and manufacturing them. With clean rooms, for example, people wear protective clothing to protect the chips, not the people. The people as a consequence have suffered significant high rates of brain cancer, prostate cancer, and birth defects. The work involves hazardous chemical handling and exposures, and the majority of workers in these manufacturing jobs are women of color.

PILAR: I've heard that the county of Santa Clara, birthplace of the electronics industry and home to Silicon Valley, has a lot of Super Fund sites, in which so many toxins have been dumped that the federal government has to come in and clean it up.

DAVIS: The county of Santa Clara has one of the most Super Fund sites in the United States, I think there's about twenty nine. This was caused by all the manufacturers in the sixties, seventies and part of the eighties, when the industry was still in the United States. Now of course they moved manufacturing overseas where there's frequently fewer regulations in some of the countries they operate.

PILAR: Doesn't the computer industry promote an image of clean industry, in production and in implementation - remember the paperless office? That seems to be a large part of the marketing by this industry - the marketing of clean, contained, modernity itself.

DAVIS: Definitely, the technology itself is promoted as something that is clean. If you look at the clean lines of the office space that people are in in the advertisements, there's kind of a sterile kind of environment that is associated with advancement. That whole image is perpetuated that this is the best thing you could hope for. Of course you don't see the flip side of how it's manufactured, you don't see that the majority of high-tech assembly workers are women of color and immigrants, who toil in the most hazardous and lowest paying jobs. You just see the upscale usage of the product. They market a futuristic modernity and the whole nine yards that these technologies will improve your life significantly.

PILAR: As an African-American woman and as a worker, what made you interested in this?

DAVIS: I worked in a state legislator's office in San Francisco, and I was working on environmental issues, on issues that related to social service and as a liaison in the African American community. I realized that there was a big schism between environmentalism and the African American community, even though there were a lot of environmental issues in San Francisco's predominantly African-American Bay View/ Hunter's Point district. I started looking at different areas. I felt recycling was one area that potentially had some kind of social or economic benefit as well as a social environmental benefit so I started working on recycling issues. Technology also interested me and so I started working on computer technology and recycling.

One of the reasons I was attracted to the industry was because we were setting the stage for how things would be manufactured in the future. The short life cycle of computers and other electronic products provides an opportunity to improve the environmental performance of the product with each generation. People were so enamored with computers, it seemed like a good way to push the industry - the engine of our economy at the time - to really take notice and make a tremendous shift in the environmental area. To insist: we want you to clean up the whole product, to take it back and to be responsible for recycling at the end.

PILAR: In the United States we are really now wired to consume these products, with 60% of people having Internet access, but we export the waste to Third World countries.

You don't see the flip side of how it's manufactured, that the majority of high-tech assembly workers are women of color and immigrants, who toil in the most hazardous and lowest paying jobs,. You just see the upscale usage of the product.

DAVIS: We're exporting most of our hazardous e-waste to Third World countries. We're enjoying the benefit of this technology, but we don't want to invest in the environmental technology and know-how to take care of our own waste. It is not much different than if we decided to ship all of our feces overseas someplace because we didn't want to build a sewer system. We don't

want to build a recycling infrastructure so we just ship it overseas.

PILAR: What would it take to build a recycling infrastructure?

DAVIS: First of all, you need to design the product so it can be recycled. Then you need a place to deposit it, a place for it to be processed, a place where they would separate the plastics and take out the glass and take out the metal and send it to the significant markets. Then you need an end market for it, someplace to sell all that material. That's the infrastructure.

They make it so convenient for you to buy the computer, they need to make it as convenient for you to recycle it. They need to make sure there is a place to drop it off and that it is collected and processed in a responsible fashion. Recycling needs to be done in a fashion that is comparable to the technology and investment that is put into creating the technology in the first place. There are state of the art facilities in which the products are manufactured and where the people who work designing this stuff are working in, and stone age circumstances in which the stuff is being recycled. We're working in the dark ages in terms of environmental protection.

PILAR: It seems that all the resources are in the designing and production, with no resources allocated to the disposal.

DAVIS: All the resources are in the designing and the production to make it perform in a way that they can sell it to you. They are trying to make the processors faster, the design sleeker, so you want to buy the next model. With new gadgets that attach to computers, everything from digital cameras, to MP3 players, to video production abilities, to smart phones and PDAs - they're trying to make you buy new stuff. They're not trying to design it so that when you use it you're not going to be exposed to toxins and the workers who manufacture it and the people who recycle it aren't going to poison themselves. They're not trying to design it so that you can buy it and if you're going to get rid of it in a couple years that something can be done with it.

PILAR: Is that being done anywhere in the world right now? Does the technology exist to make these products without toxic ingredients?

DAVIS: In Europe they passed several directives that require manufacturers to take back the product at the end of the life cycle. Those companies that sell you products here in the United States who won't take your computer back right now are taking back computers from European customers and recycling them in a fashion that the European Union has designated - so it's a big double standard. European governments have restricted certain hazardous materials so those companies are phasing out things like lead and mercury and flame retardants in the products that they sell to Europeans.

PILAR: Has the infrastructure to process and recycle hazardous material actually been set up in Europe?

DAVIS: I think that probably in Europe a lot of the material is still being shipped overseas as well. Hazardous waste just has a way of flowing downstream to people who can least resist it,

it's basically, an environmental justice issue. People who need jobs really bad and cannot afford to protect their health for the most part are the ones that are most susceptible to large companies coming in and either dumping or taking advantage of them in terms of hazardous materials use in the workplace as well as in the environment.

PILAR: I read in a Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition report that programs had been set up to do computer recycling in American prisons?

DAVIS: Companies are so averse to investing in environmental protection in terms of building a real recycling infrastructure, and investing in the technology needed to protect human health, they rather just take it to the prison and have prisoners, in a very crude fashion with unacceptable tools take it apart. At the prison at Atwater it was shown that prisoners were exposed to cadmium levels at three times the level that is permissible by OSHA. They were processing the material in a fashion that was terribly irresponsible with hammers and just busting it apart. They weren't given the proper tools, whether it was for security reasons or expense. It ended up affecting the prisoners health.

If you're in prison you're not even really employed, you get a wage, so you can't unionize - there's no way you can advocate for your health or safety and not get retaliated against. Even the techniques that they used when they first opened the facilities in the prison - this was modern day 20th century recycling - lift a TV up over your head and smash it on the counter or take a hammer to it and smash in the glass. The products are so poorly designed you can't just pop them apart or with a simple screwdriver take out a couple of screws, and separate the plastic from the glass. You have to take a sledgehammer to it. The products clearly need to be designed differently and the manufacturer needs to take responsibility for designing them so they don't have to depend on a really inexpensive labor force who are willing to smash the computers on the floor or with sledgehammers and get cut up potentially, or ship it overseas to people who are willing to smash or burn them improperly. The whole industry really needs to be revamped, they really need to reconsider how they design it, and what they are designing it for - not just to look cool, not just to be able to manufacture it cheaply, not just to meet the lowest regulatory standards, but so that it's protecting the environment.

PILAR: What would help drive that idea?

DAVIS: Consumers demanding that they want products that aren't going to damage their health in the long run. When people purchase a computer they should always ask - does the manufacturer take this computer back. People need to start pushing for change in laws, that's the bottom line, that will really change the industry. We need a really big shift right now from the way we protect the environment to the way that we can - to the kind of laws and the kind of marketing we need to have a sustainable system, an environmentally sustainable manufacturing process.

PILAR: Do you think that's possible with computers?

DAVIS: I do. I think its possible. I think it definitely will happen.

for more information on the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, please visit: www.svtc.org



cyberlabia #2, digital print

praba pilar, 2005

Internet geography map developed by John Risch and researchers at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory.

Interview with Paulina Borsook, by Praba Pilar

May 6, 2004

Paulina Borsook is the author of the forthcoming Wired for Sex: An Illustrated Guide to Sex, Technology, and the Way We Live Today and of Cyberselfish/A Critical Romp through the Highly Libertarian Culture of High-Tech (Public Affairs/2000). Her fiction, humor, essays, and journalism, as published in "Wired", "Suck", "Mother Jones", "Salon", and "The New York Times", have entertained, enlightened, and in some cases, enraged her readers for more than a decade. She has been a frequent contributor to NPR, and has an MFA from Columbia University.

In 2001 I invited Borsook to be part of a panel discussion/performative dialogue/performance done by Los Cybrids, at the LAB in San Francisco. She spoke about cyber-culture with humor and intensity. When I was organizing Computers Are A Girl's Best Friend, I found out about her forthcoming book and knew I had to involve her.

I wanted to talk to Borsook about telesexuality, the divorce from copulation, and other adventures of our techno-sexual age, and she drove up from Santa Cruz to meet me for a chat at a friend's recording studio. She clued me in to the Thrill Hammer 3000, sex toys called Real Dolls, Zagat guides to sex workers, hacking the female, and her vision of sex as a place to feel safe, abandoned, expressive, playful and erotic, rather than as a place for a "can-do, technocratic, Yankee, we built Hoover dam" outlook.

PILAR: I'm curious about the divorce of copulation happening with technology, with cybersex and tele-dildonics replacing intimate contact between humans. What is tele-dildonics and what is behind it?

BORSOOK: Teledildonics is this idea that's been around in science fiction and the geek community for years. You're on the rocket ship and you download all the vital electrical impulses about your one true love, and then you never see each other again and then you can have lots of recreational time in the pod on your warp drive. More and more people are interested in the idea of sex as opposed to the reality of actual contact with a real person. The necessity of human contact is kind of subordinate to the script about what's going on.

There's this interesting, in a weird sort of way, thing being done by a guy whose been in the porn industry a long time, called the Thrill Hammer 3000. He took a 19th century gynecologists chair, got this very mobile dildo that could move in all sorts of directions, hired a porn bunny, and she straddles it. Customers pay by the minute to remotely manipulate the dildo, and she thrashes around and presumably has a good time. When you hear her interviewed, she says "oh, once I just learned to relax and let go it's really wonderful." This is like saying with phone sex, "oh I actually am 19 years old and I do have long blonde hair and really long legs and I just love having anonymous sex with older men." It's the fantasy of this woman you've never seen who you can do whatever you want to and she just digs it.

PILAR: What about the current prevalence of instrumentality?

What really made AOL's fortune was bringing hot chat to middle America.

BORSOOK: Instrumentality in sex has been around forever. There's these beautiful ivory dildos in 17th and 18th century Japan that the merchant class bought for their wives to

use when they were being neglected, and there's this wonderful book on the art of it in the decadence of Weimar Berlin. A lot of people have had impulses in this way for a very long time, it's just that now, its driving deviance down. In other words, everything is ok and we don't get icked out by anything. Maybe it's just a good thing, we're acknowledging the range of human experience and since its now alright to do it, its ok to engage in sex. It comes down to this fundamental thing, are you interested in the interesting effects you can create with a partner - whatever those subtle human impulses and drives and cues are - or are you interested in looking at your partner as sort of an erector set.

Once something gets talked about in a mainstream publication it has already crested as a trend so the fact that the writers of *Sex and the City* could have the rabbit pearl sex toy as an ongoing, minor leitmotif in that TV show was a way of saying that the writers felt that sex toys have become so mainstream that it was okay to talk about them. I've always had a peculiarly feminist reaction to it which is sort of odd because the majority of sex toys are geared towards women and it would seem to imply that something is wrong with us, that we need household appliances to help us along, whereas guys don't.

PILAR: What are some of the sex toys that are emerging on the market?

BORSOOK: There's these very high end sex toys called Real Dolls that start at \$5,000. They have articulable fingers, are totally anatomically correct, can be designed to whatever body type you like. They're made out of cyberskin, so the skin is very fleshlike. People buy these Real Dolls and use them for every conceivable sexual purpose that you can possibly image. They dress them up, take them out, plan a hot weekend with them - whatever you think that you would want the woman of your dreams to be.

PILAR: One of the things I've noticed is that a lot of current online pornography shows women getting picked up off the street in vans, offered a little money, getting gang raped in the van, then being thrown out without getting paid. The men are "taking advantage" of these "dumb" chicks that are really just "greedy bitches" getting their just desserts.

BORSOOK: First of all, there's fads in porn, you look at the spam coming in and you see what's this year's fashion. Right after the invasion of Iraq I was getting a lot of porn spam that said "see Iraqi women beaten and raped." That was the current screen on which to project this domination fantasy. Whoever you want to do it to this time can really vary, so you get into the age old uneasiness between feminism and pornography - on the one hand you want to support free speech, on the other hand as a woman it's scary how much of it seems to be violent.

I don't know if you know this but what really made AOL's fortune was bringing hot chat to

middle America. In the 1990's AOL was being presented as sort of main street - we can exchange cookie recipes and do hobbies and organize girl scout troops. Actually what was making AOL all the money was all the hot chat that was going on. It was hot chat for people in middle America that didn't know the old Internet, dot alt, dot bondage, dot kitty kat, etc. and for a lot of women and gay people this was great. If they were stuck in the middle of nowhere, they found out they're not the only person - it was very supportive and really great - they didn't feel isolated, they didn't feel like freaks. In particular for women it was a way for them to explore being sexual buccaneers or getting into fantasies they've never been into before or they felt they were stuck in a bad relationship and this was a way to carve out a private space for themselves.

PILAR: It seems to me that pornography has gone from the Internet to now permeating the culture because there's so much porn available and you see so much more flesh everywhere you go.

BORSOOK: The imagery is so hooker like and pornographic everywhere you go, even if its not explicit pornography. In the typical rock video, the typical anything, the women are disporting themselves in a way that we would associate with a really cheesy stripper bar, so you could say that maybe there's a pervasive eroticisation of culture throughout. There's probably sort of a feedback loop between the two.

An interesting thing I found doing some of my research is that some of the escort services - the first one that did this was in San Francisco, it was called the San Francisco Red Book and basically it was where guys could rate the services and talents of call girls. It was kind of a Zagat Guide of sex workers and what I heard was that all the sex workers in San Francisco hated this, because a lot of the times the guys would have an experience with a worker and then get online and literally trash her. In some sense that was what they got off on, it was so they could humiliate her for what went on, or they would say, she was reasonable - meaning, I was able to talk her down in terms of money. The sex workers really hated it because they felt that it was diminishing their craft and trade. It's like commodification, instead of opening your Zagat Guide for restaurants everywhere you go, you open your Zagat Guide for sex workers - its kind of amazing to think that this stuff can be so ranked and rated and given three and a half stars and Michelin Guide and all that kind of stuff.

PILAR: Half of me questions whether things have become more visible, that technology has allowed patterns within society to become more visible.

BORSOOK: I've been hanging around technology culture for a really long time and I tend to pay attention to it and something that is

Since personal computers came along there's always been some attempt at interactive porn

so pervasive in that world is the idea that everything can be reduced to an algorithm, commodified and reduced to code. A lot of times geeks have this attitude - to hack the female - "if I could just figure out the algorithm then I could get her to put out, or if I could just figure out what the secret code is to being cool I won't be the reject at the party, in other words, if I could just figure out the rule set it will be fine."

When I look at this Zagat Guide rating of sex workers, a little too eerily it reminds me of these geek efforts at reducing everything to code and rules and 'if thens' and 'do loops' and exceptions and all that kind of stuff . I think human relations are much more irrational than that and they're much more mysterious and they're much more magical. What's ineffable about human relations, what makes them mushy and yummy and good and enriching and in a sense what everybody's looking for, in a lot of ways the same reason that people take drugs, is to be taken out of themselves. They look for intimacy and human connection to get taken out of themselves, to get outside that prison house of self, so the idea that one can codify in advance exactly what it is one wants or what one's looking for or what works - that puts humans in the category of machines. Maybe it would be more convenient to have everything be programmed that way, but its just not, that's the nature of being biomorphic and part of the natural universe.

PILAR: What about interactive sex?

BORSOOK: Oh like the webcams, where you can pay someone and she will disport herself in a certain way with whatever you would like her to disport herself with. There's nothing new in that, it's like a lap dancer. Since personal computers came along there's always been some attempt at interactive porn. The really early ones were really simple - now they've gotten much more sophisticated, there's interactive porn DVDs that are voice activated - "Hi, I'm Tiffany, do you want to have it rough, say rough", ok rough, - on the one hand it's interactive and on the other, it's totally canned. Tiffany is always going to do it the same way when you pick rough, so repetition compulsion, maybe if it works that way for you. To me the great thing about sex if you're really doing it right is that its not boring and its not the same thing every time and it's the unexpectedness of your responses and your partners response that makes it interesting and fun and worth doing again.

I have a friend who's a design god and he's done a lot in the information architecture world and when he and I talk about interactive, as smart and as sweet and as great as he is, he is still talking about these very canned things - it's interactive and you choose one of these three outcomes. Its not interactive like you and me having a conversation, where neither of us knows what unique sentence we're going to utter, each time. Even the term interactive has become very debased.

PILAR: That's one problem with a lot of net artwork, it pretends to be interactive but its completely canned.

With all the emphasis on technique and technology you're missing the stuff that could really make for hot sex and not being bored with your partner

BORSOOK: It's like the educational software for children, where they only want certain canned kinds of responses and

certain canned way of drawing things and its not interactive in any genuine sense whatsoever.

PILAR: Perhaps this is causing mores to loosen up and become more liberated?

BORSOOK: It depends what you want liberated to be. Remember all the really pernicious non-

sense that was always promulgated about female sexuality, about how women aren't supposed to enjoy sex and they are only supposed to have vaginal orgasms and whatever bad horrible things have always been around - should do this, can't do that, have to do this, shouldn't feel that, bad, bad, bad, bad, bad - what I feel is that there is just as much pernicious nonsense coming right now from the other direction.

With all the emphasis on technique and technology you're missing the stuff that could really make for hot sex and not being bored with your partner, which is

A lot of times geeks have this attitude - to hack the female - "if I could just figure out the algorithm then I could get her to put out

feeling safe, feeling abandon, feeling expressive, having your sense of play and eros in the biggest sense liberated. That to me is what is essential to really great sex with someone, and with this focus on technique and technology - it is sort of this American, can-do, technocratic Yankee we built Hoover Dam and we can make you have 17 orgasms thing.

The current orthodoxy is that it's about technology and maybe that's just as ridiculous as the 50's feminine mystique lie on your back and pretend you're a flower stuff. A lot of the stuff is stepping around the fact of what makes something hot is what you feel about the person that you're with or how the person that you're with makes you feel about yourself. You can dress it up with all the humming buzzing devices that you want, but that's not the current wisdom right now, so maybe it is more liberating for lots of people. I would never want to argue with what gets other people off, I just sort of think that's it's sort of short circuiting it and in a way it sort of fits with our current society, as if we're all living in a great big Sharper Image catalogue and I don't think we are.

PILAR: One aspect of the people working in high tech is how much strippers and sex workers were part of the scene - I guess it's part of having all that money.

BORSOOK: Yeah, that's Wall Street in the 80's, remember the Boom Boom Room, its young guys, too much money and not enough time. One of the things that seems to have come out of Silicon Valley and the relationship with sex workers is what's called "the girlfriend experience." It's what it sounds like. Since its too difficult, scary and demanding to try to figure how to establish intimacy with another human being, and maybe the guy doesn't have such great social skills to begin with or just moved here or is from a foreign country, he hires a sex worker and she give him the girlfriend experience. They go out to dinner, have a nice talk, act as if they like each other and then have sex.

PILAR: I've been reading that global sex syndicates use the web to recruit more women from around the world and that the internet is helping to globalize the sex trade.

BORSOOK: The thing that freaks me out is the brutal sex stuff and the kid sex stuff. That is really disturbing to me and of course its impossible to do anything about - the age of consent varies from country to country, there is a global oversupply of young people, or children ready to be exploited and the good technology. There's no way to enforce or do anything about it. There's an

interesting question here about - is this stuff just bringing out more into the open these tastes and proclivities and maybe barbarities that have always been there, or are we fostering them?

I had a really wonderful friend who at one point got a job as a phone sex worker, and she began to be very uneasy about it, because some of these guys had really really creepy fantasies that she was going along with, and she was saying - "I didn't know what I was doing, if I was giving a safe outlet for these people or if by playing along with it and role playing I was saying that this was ok." After a month or two of this she said, "I just couldn't do it anymore, because I didn't know where I came down on the issue." That's how I feel about the globalization of the sex trade, are we kind of - the way the radical right would say - perverting the taste when you expose people to things and they're going to go wild, which I tend not to believe, and on the other hand you do get desensitized.

I am almost fifty and I get shocked by the degree of sex and violence I see on TV and I'm the first TV generation, because there's so much more of it and it's so much more explicit than when I was growing up and I think the degree of desensitization as a culture that we're having is really kind of scary. So I see the global sex trade as being part of it - it's easier to exploit people better than ever. I put as part of the sex trade the mail order bride thing, mail order brides from Russia or Asia, whatever, you can't solve your relationship problems here in North America, just import someone who doesn't speak the language and is grateful to get out of a life of grinding poverty and she'll be your slave.

PILAR: On the internet you can hide your identity so much and play with identity. I think that was really important in the early days. You hear less about it now.

BORSOOK: I think the people that have always liked the avatar thing are more often geeks than anything else. There keep on being commercial ventures where they try to create spaces where people can play with the avatars. There was the Palace about five years ago and there's one called there.com using the idea of avatars and the people that I know that seem to be most into it are the people who live and work in high tech. The thing about a place like AOL where there isn't a one to one mapping between your log in name and who you are people get to play with identities, there's been so many studies written about how in chat rooms the person who's acting hyper femmy is actually a guy, it's kind of like drag queens, they're much more femmy than any biological woman would ever be, and then you think, why are they acting like this. I think the playing of identity, it's like just because drag is much more out than it was twenty years ago doesn't mean there aren't going to be new drag queens born every minute.

PILAR: The playing with identity reminds me of cyberstalking, you can cyberstalk someone and go after a real identity.

I think the degree of desensitization as a culture that we're having is really kind of scary.

BORSOOK: It does happen, actually I ghostwrote a chapter in a book on this stuff recently, and the thing

is it does happen, but it doesn't happen as often as people are alarmist about. It's more likely you have a harasser in real life and that person will harass you online as well, in other words it will be

another mode of doing it as well.

PILAR: The part of cyberstalking that is really powerful is how the police and the FBI use databases to track us all.

BORSOOK: It's surveillance and lack of privacy and the databases and the same with corporate America, that's the stuff that's really scary.

PILAR: That's cyberstalking.

BORSOOK: That's scary and horrifying and you have no control over it and you don't even know its going on and you really have no control over it, that's scary, and that's our Orwellian world we're living in right now, and that's political.

PILAR: I'm worried about the convergence of so much data in so easily accessible forms.

BORSOOK: I am too. But the thing is that, first of all, these people are so incredibly incompetent, and you know how difficult it is to keep a database updated, groomed, not corrupt, clean, cooperating with each other. There's a part of me that goes, you know, entropy will take care of a lot of this, because in cases where you're trying to get somebody to solve the case and they can't get the data they want. Yes there can be some kind of data matching, but its really not as easy as it appears to be in - whatever TV thing or spy thing you see, it's not like we type into the Interpol database and everything you've ever done is there. Let's just hope incompetence is on our side.



cyberlabia #4, digital print
Internet geography map developed by H. Shiozawa and Y. Matsushita.

praba pilar, 2005

Interview with Art McGee, by Praba Pilar

January 7, 2005

*Art McGee is considered by many to be the father of “Black” or Pan-African cyberspace, having been the first person to research and document Black sociocultural production and usage in online environments. McGee is a member and co-founder of the emerging **Media Justice Network**, a national coalition of grassroots activists and policy advocates who are putting a race, gender, and class analysis at the center of the movement to create a truly democratic media landscape. McGee currently serves on the Board of Directors of the **Online Policy Group**, a research, policy, and advocacy organization focused on equality in and equal access to cyberspace.*



I heard McGee talk about the revolutionary potential of the Internet at the 2004 AFRO-GEEKS Conference at UC Santa Barbara. I was very interested in his views because in 1998 I had developed an art activist website, artactivist.com. It was a publicity engine for the art activist group “The Hexterminators: SuperHeroes of the Biozoid Era,” whose main work consisted of opposing the commercialization of the Terminator gene. The website won an activist award and an environmental site award and had hundreds of thousands of visitors. As the webmistress I had to handle voluminous amounts of email correspondence from activists, press outlets, members of foreign governments, other activist groups and SuperHero outfits around the globe. It took over four hours a day just to get through the email correspondence. As I spoke to other activists about how problematic this was becoming, I heard more and more how they were taking all of their activism online. It seemed like a loss and a cop out to me.

I invited McGee to my studio, and he talked about accepted notions of race in the utilization of information and communication technologies, the politics behind the digital divide and the mentality behind notions of racelessness on cyberspace, while pointing out directions activists should look in.

PILAR: I’m curious about your ideas on the revolutionary potential of the internet because I don’t see it that way. If anything, the Internet and the Web further globalization by facilitating the transfer of goods across the world through advanced communications - it is another agent to increase corporate globalization. Some activists use it effectively in organizations like Moveon.org for their specific aims, but it seems a lot of activists are sick of the down and dirty grassroots people oriented organizing - they’re trying to escape into this technological fix which is to do all their organizing online.

MCGEE: There are certain sectors within the activist community, primarily those tending to be too enamored with the technology, who sometimes slip into this utopian narrative where there is an assumption that the technology in and of itself will bring about change, and I disagree with that. In fact my experience has been that the technology doesn’t really help - particularly with the Internet, unless people have a fundamental and sound understanding of basic communication, in other words, understanding how to communicate messages and ideas to people irrespective of

the medium.

One of the most important things about communications, and it's the thing that's most important to emphasize in terms of it being a precursor to social change - people have to understand they're not the only one. That's one of the things about being radical is that often the society and the way that the propaganda of the society tells you that you're crazy, that there's a certain way of doing things and if you fall outside of that there's something wrong with you. It's only through communication that people are able to understand that there is a logic to what they're thinking and believing, that they're not somehow some sort of isolated person that's insane but that what they're thinking is very much in tune with a lot of other people.

PILAR: That brings up the question of who has the access, which isolated people are going to be getting this information. Is there still such a marked racial divide in access to these technologies?

MCGEE: I don't think there was ever as much of stark divide based upon race in the first place. I believe that it was always much more of a kind of cultural economic gap. It wasn't necessarily that black people or other minority groups didn't have access to something that whites did, but

rather there were certain cultural decisions that were made as to the usefulness of the particular form of technology that most people had been promoting, that being the personal computer.



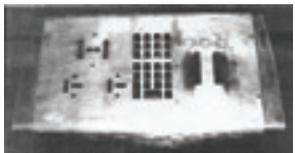
One thing that's often a mistake is that people have all these assumptions about people of color being afraid of technology. If you actually observe people of color in their every day life, they actually take to technology quite easily, before most people. Thinking about pagers going back to the 1980s or cell phones, people of color, if they have a need for a technology they adopt it quite quickly. The bigger issue was always one partially around class and economics, that of being able to afford a personal computer, but also making the decision that they felt that a personal computer specifically is what they wanted as opposed to for example a game console or a cell phone or some other form of technology which was more in tune with their life style.



Part of the problem with the way that the whole digital divide has been laid out is its been very - I hate to use the term - "black and white", not in terms of race but in terms of binary opposition. You're either online or your offline, you either have a computer or you don't, but when you actually look at the facts there's a whole range of different ways that people use and access technology.



PILAR: Wasn't the digital divide "emergency" of years back a way to transfer monies from the public sector to the private sector?



MCGEE: This is one of my pet peeves, I find myself frustrated by a type of discussion that happens, particularly in American society, that is

lacking an interrogation of how capitalism works. There's this kind of overarching narrative about our economic system that assumes a kind of good will or good intent on corporate entities that donate or give charity, without looking at that as something that they do in their own self interest. There is a failure to recognize that corporate entities do not do things because they are there to help, they're doing them because these things are in their interest. One of the things that corporations do, like drug dealers, is give things away - number one to give themselves a good image, for marketing purposes - but they also give things away to hook you into being a consumer of their products.



When you talk about the digital divide and the discourse of the digital divide another big problem with it is that so much of it was only framed in terms of the lack of consumers and not in terms of larger issues having to do with education and technical competency. For example, about training more people of color, Latinos, African Americans, to be scientists and engineers who would be the ones designing and building computers as opposed to just being able to go and buy a computer for the home. That is the larger problem, so much of the discussion on the digital divide was primarily consumer oriented - it's that not enough of these people have these things in their house and not more so on this larger issue about technical mastery, about engineering and mathematics, about the fundamentals of how computers are built in terms of actually being the engineers and architects so that then they could build their own companies and be self determining.

PILAR: My background is in economics, and I always look at things from that point of view and I remember about fifteen years ago people started talking about environmental racism. Those people were connecting the dots and saying - race and poverty are part of an environment that is difficult to survive in, and it is difficult for migrant farm laborers because they live in fields laden with pesticides, and its difficult for low income people because they live in communities full of toxic chemicals and processing plants. So here we are living in the United States, which I believe is in many fundamental ways a white supremacist state and we have this technology which we're told is beyond race. I get really frustrated with that because the humans are still here and they have a lot of consciousness about race and they are the ones driving this technology.

MCGEE: The whole thing about the racelessness of technology has been one of my biggest ideological battles of the last five years or so. It was particularly bad starting from about 1995 when the world wide web came into being and you started to see a lot of corporate entities starting to use that in this kind of advertising marketing narrative. They would talk about this is the place where there is no color no boundaries, no colorlines, it was this convergence where you had researchers and academics and corporations and all of them talking about this whole idea of the racelessness of cyberspace, the place where everyone can be equal. I think that is so ridiculous that it's hard to even respond to that sort of idea.

I was at this conference back in 1995 and there was this famous cartoon that people like to quote from the New Yorker magazine and there's these two dogs sitting at a computer terminal and one dog is sitting at a chair and he's at a computer screen and there's another dog down at the floor and he's looking up at the other dog. The dog in the chair turns to him and says "on the Inter-

net no one can tell you're a dog" and that's very symbolic of how a lot of people think about the Internet and technology that you're able to escape the judgments against you for whatever your particular identity is. What I said was very short and to the point, I sort of placed myself within the cartoon and said in response to that: "well what's wrong with being a dog?" What I was saying is that I find it in many ways offensive, the idea that in order to deal with the oppression that people of color face or different people face because of their identity they should have to essentially do the equivalent of putting a paper bag over their head so that people can no longer know who they are. The very idea of being devoid of identity or being decontextualized in a certain sense as a human being is offensive. Its not about it being colorless or color blind but about getting rid of oppression. Its not about us changing who we are but about getting rid of the conditions that cause us to be judged for who we are.

PILAR: That notion assumes that we all want to be white middle class, fitting a white norm and that's not our goal at all!

MCGEE: Exactly. You have people taking the rhetoric of Martin Luther King and twisting it around and turning it from a real equality to say that the idea is that we will become sort of generic, generically human. What's really frightening is that you see the same rhetoric both from conservative and right wing folks and from certain sectors of liberal and left community. Both in fact have much more in common with each other than they want to admit. Often a lot of people who are liberals in their dialogue in talking about a color blind world - I don't see any race I don't see any color, I'm just a human being - that their rhetoric mirrors that of conservatives in that essentially people of color are often trapped in the middle between these two poles. I find just as many liberals telling me I shouldn't be so focused on racial issues or racial and ethnic identity as I would find conservatives telling me the exact same thing.

I've often heard white liberals say 'we need to take back America, we need to get our democracy back, we need to get our country back.' The first thing I always think about when I hear someone say that is: when was it ever ours? At what point in the history of non indigenous existence on the North American continent have people of color, indigenous people, African people, other peoples ever really been fully human beings, fully citizens - when has there ever been a time where there's been a true fully realized democracy with the participation of all the people in a truly democratically functioning system? It has yet to exist, so to talk about what went wrong as if it only got bad when George Bush got here, as if things only went off track when George Bush got into office, that is the biggest mistake of all.

It's the same thing that is my problem with Michael Moore, he is individualizing the problem instead of looking at it as an institutional structural problem that's part of a continuum that stretches back and is moving forward that has no real beginning or end.

One thing that was interesting for me was the difference in response by African Americans that I was engaged in talking with after 9-11 and what you read in the newspapers and saw in the rest of the country. I think it was generally with people of color, particularly African Americans and Chicanos had a different perspective on 9-11. What I got a sense was, some were diplomatic and some folks were just rude they just said - look, this is what you get for f-ing with people for

so many years. They weren't rejoicing at the destruction and the death, but they looked at it as a form of almost karmic justice, that when you send bad stuff all around the world, when you mistreat your own citizens, these are the types of things that happen to you. That's the thing that people often don't realize that bubbling underneath the surface of American society is this kind of anger, particularly with people of color, with black and Chicano people, they don't recognize just how on a different wave length we are.

PILAR: It's interesting because the people who were so shocked are the people that have no idea of the history of this country.

MCGEE: I sometimes waver between wanting to think that people just are completely ignorant or intentionally ignorant, whether their ignorance is intentional or not because its really frightening sometimes the way people say "why do they hate us, they hate us for our freedom." What in the world kind of crazy stuff is that? That is just the most insane twisted logic. What bothers me is that so many conservatives don't seem to have principles, they don't seem to have real legitimate logical arguments for what they believe in. They just kind of make things up out of thin air, and say that's the way I feel about it so, so it's like with George Bush saying they hate our freedom, I'm like, what are you talking about, there's no sense or logic to any of that. You almost find yourself trapped in a Dali painting, it's a surreal nightmare of a certain sort and you're not quite sure how to approach it because traditional logic doesn't seem to necessarily be as effective sometimes so you need to take a step back and think, maybe we need to try a new approach.

PILAR: I'm basically in the same boat as you are.

MCGEE: I don't know if its that way around the world, but just in terms of being an American and thinking about being here in the United States I have this feeling hanging over me of a surrealism somehow this is all a dream, and something's not quite right.

PILAR: Who do you think is out there doing interesting work right now?

MCGEE: I've had a lot of experience working with people currently doing this work around media and communications, and there's an organization called Third World Majority that does training of women and girls around technology. They were one of the founding groups that were involved in formulating the ideas around media justice and talking about the issues exposing how workers are invisible in the production process of technology and talking about how third word people are exploited in the production process. They're also helping to train and give women and people of color the tools to help them to try and use technology in a certain way for their own uses.

There is one problem I find with the current state of activism that is being done, a lot of different people have talked about it, there was even a conference about it, is the professionalization of activism. I know a lot of people cynically refer to it as the 'non profit industrial complex,' but one of the things that is frustrating is how activism has become so dominated by foundations and funding cycles. The kind of independent type of activist work where people are working together in collectives and sort of working together on different issues without necessarily taking the direc-

tion from an outside source or trying to shape their work to another outside source, there's a lack of that. I recognize that there's a concrete material reality to that - you have to eat, you have to pay your rent but at the same time how do you prioritize if you think that there's something that needs to be done but you can't necessarily get funding for. Does it fall by the way side or how do you do it anyway, I don't know. That's the tricky balancing act and I think that it's probably the biggest issue facing activism today, this whole professional nature of activism.

The other thing is the compartmentalizing of activism into these discrete components and there are fewer holistic groups that tackle things from a more holistic institutional perspective. That's one of the things that attracted me to the Black Radical Congress when I first got involved because of the fact that it was an organization that dealt with a larger wider African community and wasn't necessarily a single issue group. It looked at what priorities were at a particular time and decided to address those, but it didn't limit itself to one narrow area. It was much more of a general idea based organization that worked with constituencies and with communities but it wasn't a single issue organization and that's something that's harder to find these days.

PILAR: I feel like I've watched that over my lifetime, because I started being an activist in the 1980s, mainly working on Central America solidarity and anti-apartheid South Africa organizing. Back then activists were not professionalized, they were passionate. I've been watching the non-profitization and it churns out liberals. It turns activists into liberals.

MCGEE: Exactly, and you see that's the problem. I want to emphasize I'm not hating on folks, because I realize on a certain level, being funded and being able to do this work - it would be wonderful to be paid to do revolution, but that's often one of the contradictions, that the system won't fund its own destruction. You wish it would, but that's the problem. You end up with this situation where, let's say you go to work for a non profit, how do you not lose yourself in that place where you can forget what originally attracted you to that work in the first place.

PILAR: Here's another question. Most of the web is corporate - most of the web is American corporations, or Japanese corporations or large players in the G-8 putting up web sites and putting up portals and putting up all kinds of stuff, and to me it represents the capitalist agenda. Most web use, when I look at the usability statistics, is going to these corporate web sites and they present this whole fiction of America as this DEMOCRACY and the G-8 as well meaning people and I feel that most people are exposed to that when they go online, cause they go to the NBC sites or the Microsoft sites, and by going there you're being exposed to the capitalist agenda, and that's one of the reasons why I don't know that it's going to have a revolutionary potential because it's dominated by these private corporations.

MCGEE: In terms of how the web is currently, I think there is a growing counter-current of anti-capitalist or anti-corporate sentiment out there that in many ways is starting to have a positive effect, although it still remains to be seen what the ultimate result will be from it. Although there is that corporate face to the net, there are other spaces to the net that are completely different that are very much about community, about something other than making profit. I recognize that technology and the internet was created in a predominantly American scientific, engineering, defense context but I don't necessarily view it as being inherently bad or good, one way or the other.

I look at the predominance of corporate presence on the net as being something that exists in our life no matter what, it's not something that's particular on the internet so I don't view that as a good or bad thing. On the other hand, in terms of its use as a tool, particularly a tool for communication I do think that the internet has some things to offer us that make it distinct from previous forms of technology.

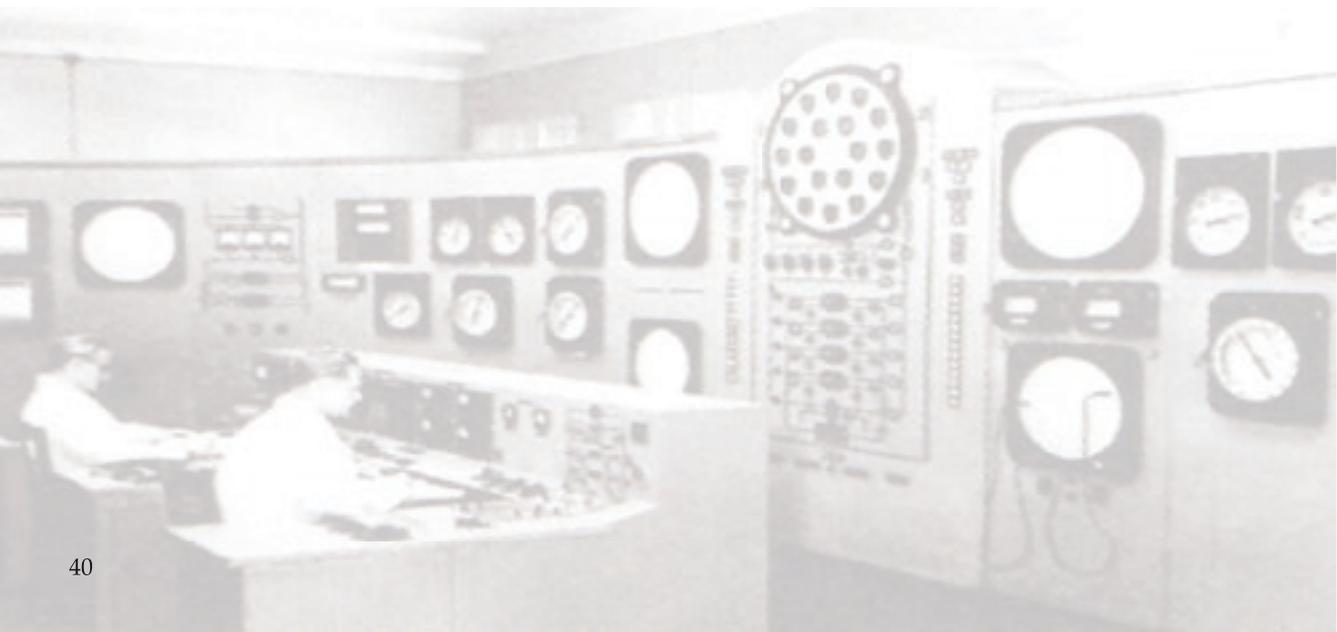
I think the mistake is, when people go on that whole utopian dope smoking trip and they start assuming that just because the internet is this open space where people can put up things and send emails, and just do whatever, that it may necessarily always be that way. That without some understanding of communication, and how to talk to people, and write, and literacy, that in and of itself things will just magically change. That's where the bigger problem is. There is this failure to understand that the internet does not exist as this island or this oasis, but that it's connected, it's usefulness is dependent upon other factors.

People always talk about it as being this place that's beyond borders, blah, blah, blah, but the fact is that the actual physical components that make up the internet, the actual internet servers and other parts and components that make up the net are physically located, the backbone networks, upon which all the information and traffic passes, those are physical entities owned in a lot of cases by major corporate entities. The danger there is that at some point, unless we start to re-think how to take some of this infrastructure and make either an independent infrastructure that would be communally based and communally owned, there's always that danger that corporate entities could at some point decide, either on their own or in cooperation with governments, to cut off our access to it.

This is why I think that too much of the discourse on the internet has been on the virtual aspects, and there hasn't been enough analysis of political economy, actually understanding who owns what, who controls what and starting to think about ways in which people can take more control of different pieces of the net, use the internet in ways that are more autonomous. For example, there's an organization I'm involved with called the Online Policy Group, based in San Francisco, and one of our projects is a community co-location project, where we have a co-op for internet servers, so we have a non-profit co-op where we all pool our money together, and we have this big block of space within another facility that hosts servers. This way we have some sort of independence where a person can set up their own server without necessarily having it being owned by a corporate entity, without being as worried whether or not someone is going to unplug it or take it away from you at some point.

PILAR: Then there would be no way to shut you down?

MCGEE: Well, there still is another layer above us, but it's a step. The point of this is that this is a kind of demonstration project of the direction that activists need to move in in understanding the need to build institutions. The ultimate goal is to start thinking about a way to institutionalize policy analysis by people of color around technology, to start talking about a way to make a permanent intervention into the global dialogues and discussions that are occurring about technology and science that often people of color are completely left out of.



CLASSIFIED



Third World Majority is a new media training and production resource center run by a collective of young women of color and our allies dedicated to developing new media practices that affect global justice and social change through grassroots political organizing. www.cultureisaweapon.org

STUDIO XX: Montreal's foremost women's digital resource centre. The Studio works with women to demystify digital technologies, to critically examine their social aspects, to facilitate women's access to technology, and to create and exhibit women's new digital art. www.studioxx.org



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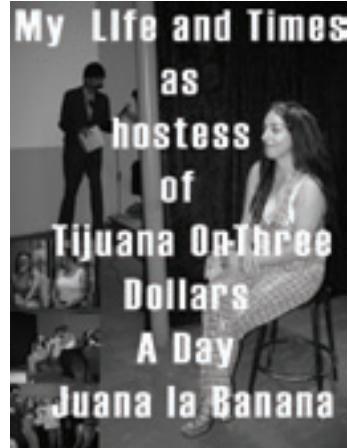
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She resides in Oakland, California, and can be reached through her website at prabapilar.com.





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