



Postdigital Education, Feminism, Women

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In this piece, I have foregrounded my own experience as a publisher and online educator in *n.paradoxa* as an Internet site (since 1996),¹ a journal (1998–2017),² and a Massive Open Online Course (2017)³ to demonstrate somewhat different tactics to those commonly discussed or used around postdigital education (Jandrić et al. 2018). When I made my first website in 1996, I was inspired by dreams of alternative academic communities linking up with my peers around the world, using email, the Net, and the idea of online publishing without paper. Ironically to tell people about it, I handed out paper notices, wrote letters, and most people printed the html to read it, finding online reading a difficult habit! The decisions I made were often pragmatic attempts to make best use of available means, rather than the latest technologies, while repurposing existing code, site, and publishing models with different content. My hope was that collections of references and links in ‘the frame’ of a site, like The Feminist Art Observatory,⁴ potentially allowed people to see an object of knowledge they had

¹Katy Deepwell started the *n.paradoxa* website in 1996. The oldest available historical snapshot, dating from 27 March 1997, presents the third issue of the *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*. See <https://web.archive.org/web/19970327203820/http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/index.htm>. These pages are now archived in new PDFs as *n.paradoxa online* on the KT press website, <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/>.

²*n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* was an academic journal developed from the *n.paradoxa* website. Published between January 1998 and July 2017, *n.paradoxa* published a total of 40 print volumes and 550 articles covering feminist art criticism and the work of women artists since the 1970s. PDFs of some of these articles can be found at <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/nparadoxa-volume-details.asp>. The content is separate from that published as *n.paradoxa online* which continued until 2010. For in-depth history of *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, see Deepwell (2017).

³The *n.paradoxa* MOOC was set up by Katy Deepwell in 2017 to increase participant awareness of feminist politics in relation to contemporary art (available at <https://nparadoxa.com/>).

⁴The Feminist Art Observatory is a resource on feminist art and women artists developed and maintained by Katy Deepwell at <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-art-observatory.asp>. These resources were published online from 1996 in different formats.

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not seen or possibly recognized before, namely, the transnational, transgenerational possibilities in feminism(s).

My own recognition of what was not being taught about feminisms in formal education or curricula suggested that the Net offered a space to compensate for these absences and one where the relationship between feminism and contemporary art could be discussed outside formal academic structures. Ivan Illich's (1970/2002: xix) notion of deschooling in 'educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his [their] living into one of learning, sharing, caring' puts this purpose rather well. But my little edit, of his to their, is rather central to the story of feminist interventions in art education, digital, or otherwise.

Feminisms exist inside and outside academia, notwithstanding the partial accommodation of women's studies, feminist theory, gender analysis, postcolonial/de-colonial feminisms, queer, intersectional, or cyberfeminisms in universities over the last 50 years. Illich's conception and idea that 'efforts to find a new balance in the global milieu depend on the deinstitutionalization of values' (1970/2002: 114), avoiding 'scholastic funnels' and instigating 'true communication webs', was written at the same moment feminism was critiquing language and world orders as man-made and uncovering their masculine bias in universal claims to the truth. Feminists pointed to the asymmetry of power in binary thinking and its hierarchies of knowledge production as well as the ways in which mainstream left thinking about revolution continued to marginalize as bourgeois the presence or contribution of feminist ideas in and through the 'woman problem'.

Illich's (1970/2002: 102) suggestion that teachers 'would probably find more congenial work, more independence, and even higher incomes by specializing as skill models, network administrators, or guidance specialists' external to the comprehensive monopoly of the schooling/university system still offers the reality of resistance in outsourced or freelance positions for women educators. Autonomous precarious labour as educators may open up the possibility to operate differently, especially where performance is heavily rationalized, monitored, and measured in neoliberal and functionalist systems, by statistics/indicators alone, not values. The system presents students with the illusion of 'consumer choice' in feedback sessions and surveys of student satisfaction, while it actually curtails opportunities in options on courses or variety in teaching. Education is not a commodity, or even the purchase of an 'experience'; education requires time and effort. Most students want more contact time with teachers to learn.

To revolutionize education, Illich's goals included: liberating 'access to things by abolishing the control which persons and institutions now exercise over educational values' in curricula and institutional structures; 'the sharing of skills by guaranteeing freedom to teach or exercise them on request'; 'the critical and creative resources of people...to call and hold meetings' other than those under the command of the formal institution; and relieving the individual from 'the obligation to shape his expectations to the services offered by any established profession—by providing him with the opportunity to draw on the experience of his peers and to entrust himself to the teacher, guide, adviser or healer of his choice' (Illich 1970/2002: 103). Illich's ideals of Promethean man aside, he did argue that improving existing institutions by injecting them with new values runs the same risk of imposing these new values on all (consider, for example, the spread of neoliberal and conservative ideals of diversity and inclusion as representing the only model for equality in diversity).

Illich did not consider the work of feminists of his time. When Illich wrote *Deschooling society* (1970/2002), women had already been exercising these ideas in their own name for several years and seeking their own ‘liberation’ in women’s groups, alternative workshops, and artists’ projects utilizing alternative forms of art education (including consciousness-raising, small group work, and activist tactics). They had questioned the emptiness of dominant values offered by schooling and attempted to build alternative educational structures in feminist and women’s organizations with different agendas. Here, for those who seek, there is a rich 50-year history of multiple feminist interventions to consider, not just one or two reduced reference points, and this in inventiveness in educational initiatives has expanded and diversified considerably.

To take one example, the concept of student-centred learning has a radical and socialist feminist history, as well as a counter-educational one in indigenous and working-class struggles, in co-operative, and co-owned projects by women’s groups, and not just through conscious-raising techniques where sharing experiences leads to collective discussion and reflection on ideology and society at large. Feminist work has taken a lead when it comes to questioning the authority of the ‘master’ (and ‘mistress’) over their pupils, proposing instead models of co-learning and co-development. In place of teaching obedience to a system, or one form of knowledge production as ‘truth’ or method, feminist theory has foregrounded critique in its questioning of systems of thought. It has developed imaginative meta-ideologizing (Sandoval 2000) alongside the making and writing of alternative genealogies from a multiplicity of perspectives in other kinds of histories, and even fictive fabulations (Haraway 1985), in how we teach about the world as it was, is now and might be in the future.

How is the postdigital a feminist concern, when it is education – analogue, digital, or postdigital – itself which is at stake in on/offline worlds? In contrast to the hyperbolic rhetoric about the Net as the library of all libraries and its capacity to build transnational communities and share information globally (a rhetoric of comprehensiveness combined with an illusion or vision of completeness in its sheer scale as ‘overload’), I want to highlight the reality of flawed, broken, and partial coverage of subjects, identities, and visibilities online – particularly for women. Is the failure to record or capture so much of feminist knowledge production or women’s experiences of the world a problem for a postdigital education or for humanity? This may seem a perverse question for *Postdigital Science and Education*, but it is parallel to the older question asked by the historian Joan Kelly (1977): Did women have a Renaissance? Did feminist knowledge even fully have a digital paradigm (outside references to Sadie Plant (1998) or Donna Haraway’s cyborgs (1985), cyberfeminisms, and xenofeminisms), before we accept any account of the postdigital as a future beyond the digital?

The lack of a digital embrace is not a situation which can be easily ‘corrected’ by additions to Wikipedia, or the passive acceptance of the first ten results from Google’s algorithms as ‘acceptable’ filtering of what is available in the world. The inadequacies of the behemoth of Wikipedia (as the Internet’s largest collective enterprise) still require a mammoth correction effort such as Women+Art+Edit-a-thon⁵ when it comes to

⁵ ‘An Edit-a-thon is a community organized event that aims to teach folks how to edit, update, and add articles on Wikipedia. These events take place year-round at museums, coffee shops, colleges, and community centers.’ Women+Art+Edit-a-thon is an annual Edit-a-thon on focused on women’s contributions to art conducted in March since 2014. See <http://www.artandfeminism.org/events/>.

acknowledging women’s cultural and artistic achievements in history. Would this effort towards a ‘corrected Wikipedia’ be a digital success story for feminism, or just another postdigital project in education, given that it only represents neat summaries of newspaper reporting and academic papers in its biographically dominated and corporate-dominated formats?

In the many books on women and technology and cyberfeminisms, women’s role in the industry as workers is presented in women’s jobs as the first computer programmers (including Ada Lovelace), data operators, and now the predominant silicon chip fabricators or call centre operators in developing countries. Women do not appear, like male gurus, as coding geniuses, software developers, or multimillion entrepreneurial owners of high-tech hardware and infrastructure businesses. The position of women as workers in this sector reinforces the lack of most women’s access to technological tools in the information society or the Fourth Industrial Revolution, particularly across developing countries.⁶ Is having a mobile phone to communicate with friends and family the same as spending 40 h a week searching or developing one’s knowledge online (which only 20% of the population apparently do⁷)? The majority of women’s labour and time around the world is still expended on boring, repetitive, maintenance work in paid jobs or not, namely, cleaning, shopping, preparing food, childcare, and care for sick, elderly, and disabled. Do the Net and its digital technologies hold the fascination of ‘advanced society’ and ‘new ways of working’ for women, as they supposedly do for many men? Do women know they have ‘dropped out’ when ‘they were never in’ (as Valerie Solanas (1967/1996) saw it) – not only because they lack material access or time to make use of the Internet’s resources, but also because they are positioned overwhelmingly as consumers of services and goods, rather than their producers?

The race to new technological futures is so overwhelmingly centred in male/masculine visions of the world of information, agenda-setting, and commentaries – and remarkably few women stand as exceptions to this. In the overload of imagery, sites, and apps delivered via the Internet, the predominance of women’s role remains as image, object, and body. In their own consumption of goods and services (including professional profiling sites online), women are repeatedly offered, imaged, and consumed as sex objects, over and above the marketing of themselves in dating and marriage markets or sex-work and porn. This emphasis has been raised by many feminists questioning whether the Net affords agency and independence for women or continues to reproduce further subservience to existing moral codes and oppressive paradigms, including religious/racial/ethnic intolerance and violence against and social/economic exploitation of women. These issues go way beyond the verbal abuse of trolling or tactics of sexual harassment and public humiliation that receive minimal attention in the media.

All women’s actual inventiveness in new technologies or media art (of which there remains much to report!) does little to change this. For every new woman game designer, artist, or film-maker celebrated online and for every new feminist

⁶ UNICEF’s Children in a Digital World report (2017) demonstrates how girls are less likely to go online in developing low-income houses, in spite of the UN’s optimism that 47% of the world is now connected online.

⁷ This quote is from the exhibition 24/7, Somerset House, October 31, 2019–February 23, 2020. The exhibition was inspired by Jonathan Crary’s (2014) book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.

campaigning group or new woman-centred web-based database or feminist journal that is launched as a counter to this system, the Net ambivalently serves to promote that which can be sold or packaged with traction in its own male-orientated value system. Everything without market value and advertising revenue quickly disappears amidst the sheer volume of other mainstream sites/spaces/images/products. Try typing ‘feminist art’ and you will see this trend clearly. Do women critically reflect enough on their role as predominantly consumers and self-promoters, rather than creators of the digital tools available to them online, before we start to discuss postdigital education?

Do not mistake what I am saying as a form of Luddite technology-bashing. On the contrary, I am eager to find new opportunities in the digital realm for feminist education and counter-stories informed by feminisms. The expansion of the digital has shaped my life as a researcher and a publisher. I am trying instead to ask a set of questions about the substantial emphasis in what is recorded, promoted, or presented online, who reads it, where is it archived, and what might its historical value be with regard to shaping our future education, values, and uses of technologies in our work. I am confronted by the difficult and disappointing reality of the Net as it has moved to increasingly restricted business models and regimented regimes of delivery with a very specific understanding of what ‘good practice’ is for websites/online journals/databases/and the ‘sharing’ (capitalisation/cannibalisation) of information.

In the arts, print journals, catalogues, and books remain the most important format, in spite of the digital transformation of their production, largely because of colour reproduction which digital media emulates but rarely supersedes, as Lev Manovich puts, in the ‘lossy-compression’ of jpgs (Manovich 2001: 54). The majority of people use Net spaces as accounts-based systems and ‘plug and play’ models on shared platforms, with fill-in boxes and choices of colour schemes and options. Through these, they happily serve up their lives, thoughts, or instant responses, in profiles or image galleries, and decide which communities to connect with, to join, or to leave. Depth and reflection give way to instant response and Twitter spats. I wonder what kind of profiling, mostly half-finished or abandoned, will be left for future archivists; what pieces of these histories will be mined in way-back machines from these platforms about digital use today?

The choice for many women is not really a choice when visibility online in pre-packaged formats is mistaken for engagement in art terms. The Net is the largest image database in the world. If an artist does not have a website or gallery representation, or is not represented in mass media online, do they even exist amongst the tens of thousands who do? Many artists take down their own records to accommodate their gallery’s documentation of their latest work (a filter of prestige). Most contemporary artists rarely have material prior to 1990 on their websites. If they do not speak English, who is their work visible to internationally? Or do they exist only as a local phenomenon, amongst a few friends? The 1980s have been forgotten online, so too the earliest computer arts. This has negative effects for what ideas about women’s cultural production, feminism, and its histories are in circulation.

The absences perpetuate the idea of documenting the 1970s only by contrast with the present: a radical moment to be recovered in new fanzine sites, temporarily created, and then abandoned. Then there is the issue of our digital legacy after death, when the ‘poor’ and incomplete data assembled about our lives may be erased (even at our own request) and public organizations and governments withdraw from using libraries,

archives, and museums to store ‘significant’ histories and rely instead on aggregating services like WorldCat, Web of Science, or Orcid. Is the Internet creating a democratization of knowledge for feminisms or just providing a shift in the overall reproduction of partial and fragmented accounts (which all archives and histories already are)? How might a postdigital education place feminist knowledge production at the centre of its enquiries to find different solutions to these environments? As a start, just take a look at the many initiatives listed on The Feminist Art Observatory.

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