Cornelia Sollfrank

episode 8

The Culture & Technology Podcast
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Episode 7: Hijacking the System
Cornelia Sollfrank

INTRODUCTION

What can early Internet art teach us about the paradigms of digital technology?

This episode of the podcast features Cornelia Sollfrank, an early pioneer of Net Art and Cyberfeminism. Cornelia's early work in the 1990s explored how the, recently introduced, World Wide Web could be used to do things in a different manner. Up until this day, her work explores many themes, which are still very relevant to this day; mostly digital cultures, self-organisation through new technologies and data as a tool that can be utilised to both positive and negative effects.

GUESTS

Cornelia Sollfrank is an artist, researcher and university lecturer who is based in Berlin. Cornelia was one of the early pioneers of Net Art and Cyberfemism and recurring themes within her work include infrastructures, aesthetics of the commons and techno-feminist practice and theory.

HOST

Severin Matusek is an editor, producer and strategist who has spent the last decade researching how technology transforms culture, communities and society.

IDEAS AND PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

- **Rhizome** is a not-for-profit arts organisation founded by Mark Tribe and based in new York City. Rhizome champions born-digital art and culture through commissions, exhibitions, scholarship, and digital preservation. https://rhizome.org
- **The Artbase** is an archive with over 2,200 artworks to date, primarily hosting works of net art but also works that employ media such as software, code, websites, moving images, games, and browsers. It is part of Rhizome by Mark Tribe. https://artbase.rhizome.org/wiki/About
- **The Thing** was an international net-community of artists and art-related projects that was started in 1991 by Wolfgang Staehle. https://anthology.rhizome.org/the-thing
- **Net Art Generator** is a computer programme, by Cornelia Sollfrank, which re-combines and collages material from the internet. This project has directly influenced her practice in the field of intellectual property. http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/net-art-generator/
- **Female Extension** is a work by Cornelia Sollfrank involving the creation of 289 computer-generated websites created by combining the internet and combining fragments of HTML into exquisite corpse-like websites. http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/female-extension/

- **Purple Noise** is an artist research group that began in September 2018 and aimed to investigate the dynamics of social media.
  https://eeclectic.de/produkt/purplenoise/

CREDITS

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Theme Music by Zanshin.

TRANSCRIPT

Cornelia Sollfrank

Thank you Severin. My pleasure.

Severin Matusek

I believe when we talk about the future of culture and technology, it's about how technology is changing culture in our lives. And obviously, the last year changed our lives profoundly. So have you been baking sourdough bread? Did you take up gardening? How was last year for you?

Cornelia Sollfrank

Ok, good question because, in fact, I normally live in Berlin, as you know, we're almost neighbours in Berlin. But I try to get out of the city for obvious reasons. Because being in the city, you know, urban life is about going out, meeting people, you know, going to cultural events. All of that was not possible last year. So why would you be in the city? So we are lucky because we have this little house in the countryside and I came here in mid-March last year. I thought, ok, for some months I'll manage to live in the countryside. It's been now, 14 months that I'm here, most of the time, there was just two quick trips in Berlin. That's it.

Severin Matusek

Congrats.

Cornelia Sollfrank

And it was crazy to see how much travelling I did for work. Not travelling at all and seeing you know, in one month, you go to four or five, six, seven different locations for work. I didn't do any of that. This has its advantages as well. I realised that I'm much more focused on things, there's much more continuity on, you know, in working if you're not constantly interrupted by travelling. On the other hand, I mean, there's a very huge garden here, which always tries to invite me to weed and plant things. But I'm afraid that's not me. I can't get excited about gardening at all.

Severin Matusek

That's interesting, because I feel like you know, there's this concept of digital gardening that has become very modern as well, in the last year, I think where people talk about the digital and technologies as something we have to maintain, care about and grow and put love and tenderness in there, which I think is also a topic of your work. But obviously in the real world. gardening is not really an interest of yours?

Cornelia Sollfrank

You have to make up your mind what do you want to take care of, you know, and I decided, at one point, consciously, do I want to get engaged with the garden or not? And then I said, nope, I'd rather take care of my own server. So I started to build my own server. And there's a lot of work related to that. It's very complex. And I'm much more happy with that at the moment.

Severin Matusek

What I'd like to talk about today is actually the history and the present about what it means to work on the internet. And also, what it means to be an artist on the internet, which is obviously something you have been part of since the very early days. So, if we go back to the mid 90s - I think in the mid 90s you were in New York - and that's when net art, this very fresh, new thing just started becoming interesting. How did you get involved with it back then? And what was the scene like?

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yeah, I mean, it was no coincidence that I was in New York. I applied for a fellowship to actually investigate Internet Art in New York, which caused some discussion, you know, with the funders, because they thought it's Internet Art, why do you have to go somewhere to explore it? I said, yeah, because there is the scene, where things happen. I need to be on-site and talk to the people and I want to do interviews and all of that. And it was - in fact - a lot, focusing on New York at the time, you know, it was several projects, which are still very relevant today.

One of the biggest actually is Rhizome, the ArtBase, which also was started by Mark Tribe back then. There was a gallery that was dedicated to make exhibitions around this new digital computer based formats, which was very experimental, they didn't make any money out of that. They were selling traditional art and put their money into the digital art. It was movie theatres, you know, and all kinds of projects and it's really interesting to think back to that, because it was a pioneer work, and a lot of people build up things and structures and developed ideas that are still very relevant today. And because it was not a very big scene, you know, it was maybe a dozen people, or if it's a lot, it was two dozen people who were engaged in that. It was amazing. I'm still in touch with many of them. And we still have this feeling of being connected through this spirit of the early days when we had such great ideas about the emancipatory potential of technology.

Severin Matusek

And why was it so small, the scene? Were there people who were critical about Net Art as such? Were there artists who said, technology is not for me, you know, it's about painting or it's about non-technology, real users? Why was the scene so small in the mid-90s?

Cornelia Sollfrank

I think it was really because it was emerging, you know? It was in the mid-90s the World Wide Web only was basically made accessible to a larger audience. And at the beginning, there were six websites. I don't know how many websites exist today. You know, there was this running gag, you know, you have six websites, you all know them by heart basically and I think it was just not for everyone of interest. For me, it's very different today digital art, especially with this whole hype around NFT's and you know, digital graphics and, and virtual reality. This was not what people were interested in back then. It was really to explore technology to build your own structures and to develop formats and infrastructures that would work outside the traditional art world. It was this very strong idea of creating, self-organised structures, infrastructures to make us independent from the traditional art world.

Severin Matusek

So technology was a means to an end to break out of an existing system with its rules and boundaries but then you also mentioned that technology is never neutral. I think also a lot about your own work that, for example with Net Art Generator and Female Extension, was to question some of the cultures, ideologies that are implanted in certain uses of technology. How aware were you and the artists back then of technology as a tool that's never neutral?

Cornelia Sollfrank

I would say not much at all, that was really not the discussion. There was this excitement, you know, about machines and code and we associated with that, hacker culture, and hacker culture, MIT, you know, all the labs, where these guys were developing great stuff, protocols, and whatever. So it was more that we wanted to participate in this hacker culture and become part of that, that was much more prominent, or predominant, also, because what we know, today, you know, the predominant of them, of the big corporations that kind of have technological development under control, that was not visible at all. Of course, you know, there was Windows. We didn't like Windows, it was Bill Gates, it was proprietary, we didn't like it so you know, people more moved to, to Apple and Macintosh, because that was still cool back then. I think this idea to be critical of technology was really not what was in the air in the beginning, because technological development had come out of critical underground culture, basically most of it. So that was what we were interested in.

Severin Matusek

You were also part of a sort of community back then. It was called, The Thing, right? The Thing New York, which was, I think, an arts community, but also an internet service provider, and a bulletin board. And I would say it was one of the first... it was a community you were part of. So can you tell us a little bit about what it meant to be part of that community back then? How you self organised? How your relationships formed, and what it became today?

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yeah, The Thing is really an interesting project, because it was started in 1991, you know, which is exactly 30 years ago, if you imagine. It started as a bulletin board system. So it was no fancy, you know, graphic user design or anything. The idea was simple. It was that artists want to initiate their own speaking and writing about art, you know, that was like a gesture of empowerment, to not only make the art and let others talk about it, but to create a discursive space ourselves where we would discuss art. The interesting thing was it was founded in New York by a German artist and because there was already this transatlantic connection - of Wolfgang Staehle who had a big network, also in Germany - the thing was that it was, on the one hand, it was a local thing in New York, and they also had an office space and all kinds of facilities. But there was from the beginning on a very strong connection to different locations in Europe. I think the first one was in Cologne, there was one in Hamburg. And if you look up, there is a long entry on Wikipedia about The Thing.

If you look at our page, you can see that over time, 13 Thing platforms have been created in different countries and cities outside of New York. And this understood itself as operating in the spirit of The Thing, New York, but creating an independent platform. What was interesting about that, the founder Wolfgang Staehle, he was very open and generous. He's, you know, he said to everyone, you can use the concept and you can do an implementation as you like, as it makes sense in your own environment. And that was very inspiring for people because you could do something that was very specific to your location at the same time, you always were part of the big network.

Severin Matusek

And then to your own personal work, the Net Art Generator that followed out of that. Before you talk about it, and I believe you have talked about it very many times, because I think this is the one main work that has become so influential and also been part of your biography. So how did one lead to another? You coming to New York, connecting with a few dozen internet artists, being part of The Thing New York and then creating Female Extension and Net Art Generator ? How did that happen?

Cornelia Sollfrank

It was interesting, because my time in New York, I used to explore all these projects and try to get an understanding what is it about. I did not have my own approach or my own work back then. So it was really an exploration, it was research. When I came back from New York, the first thing that I heard was that the Kunsthalle Hamburg was going to do the first museum competition for internet art and I thought, oh, my God, this is exactly what no one needs, and no one wants. It was a complete misunderstanding, because internet art was really about, you know, creating independent spaces and not being judged by the traditional art world.

Severin Matusek

Which I find so interesting because, today it would be different, right? If the Kunsthalle Hamburg would make such a competition today, you wouldn't be that critical about it, because it has become such a norm that large institutions all are part of, you know, this bigger thing.

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yes, it's changed, it definitely changed. I have been collaborating with big institutions also, but I prefer smaller institutions, I have to say to collaborate. It has to do with the basic paradigms of digital art, and I think they still do not go very well with the needs of the art world. I mean, it has been in constant struggle, you know, how to make a digital artwork unique, or an original that can be sold and all of that. So coming back to this competition and Hamburg, it made me very angry, and so they don't get The Thing, and I don't want to be judged by them and there should not be like the best Net Artist, you know? It's totally against the spirit of community, of collaboration, of building independent spaces. So I made a plan to, certainly disrupt the competition, if not totally destroy it. I mean, I was not sure how far I would get with my plan but I thought one interesting hacker strategy is to flood.

For example, a server with so many requests that it breaks down, so it's kind of flooding. So I thought, ok, I don't criticise what's going on, I just flood the competition, with so many net artists that they will not be able to handle it. I created 300 fictitious net artists and flooded the competition. It was all automated, so I didn't break down but then I had to create 300 fictitious net art projects. For that I used an old cultural technique from the 20th Century, which is collage. So I made a colour code collage. I made a collage of random, randomly pasted HTML code to create new websites and I just sent all these websites to the museum, you know, for the jury to be judged. Still everything worked and nothing happened until the final press release was sent out by the museum. I have to say, the 300 artists I created were all female and the three prizes that were given away were given to male artists. In the meantime, the museum already had published a press release saying it's a huge success and more than two-thirds of the artists that submitted work were female. I had forgotten about that in the process but in the end, it was three male artists. So, I didn't actually manage to technically you know, crash or break the competition. So the only chance left, I had to go to the press conference and hand out my press release where I said, ok guys, this is what I did. I submitted the 300, fake artists and websites and I think that is an adequate response to call for net art because this is what the internet is about. To create fake identities, to multiply, to have no original artists and artworks and so on and so forth. The museum did not find that funny at all. They don't find it funny today. I mean, in the years after there have been artists who are researching net art, getting in touch with the museum and they tried to get information on it. There's nothing in the files. It's been deleted from the history of the museum. I'm telling the story because it leads to the Net Art Generator because copying and pasting randomly HTML code created very interesting websites and after the competition, I decided that I wanted to follow this path because I thought it's quite interesting. It's like the collage. The collage was the first step in modernism, to question the idea of the white canvas and the original artist that creates original creation. Collage was already based on existing material that was recombined. This is what I exactly did with the Net Art Generator. I developed a script that randomly combined existing material on the internet to

make it into new works. For me, that has a lot to do with this attempt over these ideas, of creating independent spaces and empowering artists because for me, that was also a criticism of the idea of the genius artist creator and the idea of the original work. So that is the context.

Severin Matusek

I thought it was so interesting as well, because what you created back then in 1997, still is so relevant today, when it comes to these collage websites that are essentially fake. You know, fake news is a big challenge online today, right? With all these websites, basically, transmitting knowledge, that's essentially not true. As well as fake profiles, where lots of social media profiles out there are actually fake. They are bots created by other people who, probably with the same intentions you had, they want to manipulate, they want to steer or they want to criticise, or they want to make money. There's tonnes of intention behind that. So when you think about your work back in 1997, and then compared to today's world, what do you think? How did the internet and also being an artist questioning and hacking certain ideologies? How did that change and evolve over the last 30 years or 25 years?

Cornelia Sollfrank

Well, the first thought I have is that we were incredibly naive back then. We really thought we can use technology to undermine structures that we are critical of like the art world. So it was a bit of an innocent take on technology and, of course, it took a while. There was a lot of things going on, like nets critique and you know, mailing lists on political discourse and technology, all of that. Then all of a sudden social media appeared, and it was obvious. Social media is bad, we don't engage, it's corporate, someone privately owns what we are doing there and they are harvesting our data and we don't want to be part of this exploitation system. People started to develop alternatives, which did not really take off for certain reasons, and social media proliferated became more bigger and recently I read that more than half of the world population engages daily with social media. So it's incredibly powerful and if you imagine that this is all privately owned structures where no one except the owners have control over the terms of use and conditions and how they use data, it's unbelievable. It's like a development, which was totally unexpected, and because we were so busy in our little world trying to create alternatives and to whatever, I think we were a bit ignorant also towards these developments for too long, at least I was. It took me quite a while actually to understand the power, the real power of social media.

Then I also gave up this naive idea that if I don't have a Facebook account I'm a good person, and I'm safe, and I don't contribute to it because it doesn't matter if you have a Facebook account or not. The power, the influence of these platforms to manipulate on large scale people and political processes, is there no matter if I have an account or not. So this was the moment when I started to engage with social media and also because I got interested really in what attracts people to be there and spend so much time there. I have to say that I start to understand it from the perspective of personal use. The technology behind these platforms is great and it's interesting what you can do. I can find people I have not met for a long time, I can

keep in touch with people I know, but I'm not close friends, I can still follow what they're doing, I can announce my own work. The only strict rule that I have is that I don't publish any private stuff, neither my food, no pictures of my family, or whatever. It's a very useful information infrastructure, which I also use, and also criticise at the same time, but it's not easy to find a good entry point for a reasonable criticism. You can say we should expropriate Mark Zuckerberg, but if we expropriate him, to whom should it be given, this global infrastructure? I don't know. Big question.

Severin Matusek

So is your relationship to social media maybe a little bit like a relationship to capitalism? Like you might not like it or criticise it, but you can't really not live in a capitalist society at least?

Cornelia Sollfrank

It's more specific, I think, because you have different social media platforms, who function differently, do different things. The criticism on social media is based on an anti-capitalist criticism, which means, it's based on exploiting not just people and the work, but also the world, the earth, the environment. So at the moment, I'm still researching, I'm trying out things, I'm exploring dynamics, because the dynamics of social media is so complex meanwhile. That's the first thing you have to understand, how do these different platforms actually work? What is their power? In order to get a better understanding of where there might be a point for intervention.

Severin Matusek

One point of intervention that I think you started in 2019 is Purple Noise, which is a collective that tries to critically work with social media. Can you tell us a little bit about what Purple Noise is and how it came about?

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yeah, Purple Noise was the response to that shock that I had regarding the power of social media and it was not only social media, it was also the revelations of Edward Snowden. I think we kind of knew it somehow before but then it was obvious what was going on. That we are spied on, that our data are being collected without our consent, that governments are completely involved with secret services or they are completely helpless in the face of these global corporations who just do whatever they want. They give a shit about national legislation. So this realisation was asking to be further explored and I think that was the moment when we decided we wanted to work collaboratively. I would not call Purple Noise a collective because a collective consists of specific people who have agreed that they work together. We understand ourselves as an open research group and a network and we particularly call for participants when we conceive of specific activities and actions. The idea really is to get a deeper understanding of the dynamics of social media and so we create interventions. We try a little bit, as far as possible, to do sort of reverse engineering and see when we understand memes are

important or when certain hashtags have a certain power they can unfold. We try to work with these elements, that create, or that are important in the dynamics of social media.

Severin Matusek

You mentioned this one intervention that you did, where I think there was a large scale demonstration. You created posters with certain slogans on it and gave it to random people. Then you took pictures of them put it on Instagram, Twitter, and pretended that these were actually activists of Purple Noise, even though they were random strangers who didn't know what they were protesting for.

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yeah, that was our first research, I would say. It was the exploration, or was based, on the question, 'How online and offline protests are related?' Now everyone posts photos and videos of protests on social media, other people see it as, 'oh, there are so many people in the streets in my city, I should also go'. This dynamic. Classical media would report differently from what you can get through social media. So these dynamics, how this is connected. There was this big demonstration at the City of Women's festival that we basically hijacked. We didn't give our posters and our banners to everyone, but always to selected groups of people. Then we had photographers and filmmakers who took photos. In the end, we could create an online presence that made it look like that this whole demonstration was basically about Purple Noise and our slogans. It was not even slogans. We had this very strong visual language, which plays with gender symbols, and hashtags.

Severin Matusek

It reminded me of what happened last year in June when worldwide there were Black Lives Matter demonstrations. There were some of these videos that popped up where you could see models and other influencers, basically just appearing for a minute, with their own personal photographer holding up the sign Black Lives Matter and then disappearing again, which is a little bit what you've done.

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yeah, of course. I mean, it's so incredibly interesting also, what influencers do. There's a whole new generation of political activists who are also influencers and have no problem with product placement in their political videos. We are also looking into this we have this reputation of being a political or somehow authentic research group. We don't do that for money or anything, we have more idealistic goals. If all of a sudden, in our next intervention, we would all wear Gucci handbags or something, I think it would be quite fun to see what does it to our political goals? Is this a normal thing to happen today?

I think this is a very interesting thing, that there is a sort of normalisation, and the next generation that they combine Black Lives Matter, Black Activism, with commercial advertisements. What is going on? I don't get it, you know, it's very confusing but that's interesting. That is so interesting because it confronts me all the time. I feel, it makes me feel so very old, because I think, 'Oh, my God, I still have these idealistic ideas of what you do and what you don't do' and because they unfold a lot of power with what they do. At the same time, they use their power to do advertisements for the system that they actually criticise. So these are the sort of contradictions that I find very interesting as an artist, and I think it's a good material to work with.

Severin Matusek

I would like to go back to the conversation about technology as something that's not neutral. When you talked about social media you said it's too easy to say, 'I'm not using it because I'm against it', you know, against technologies privately owned, and so on. So you're using social media now in order to understand and to still explore. At the same time I personally perceived that about four or five years ago, technology criticism really happened on a large scale. You also mentioned it. The revelations by Edward Snowden on government surveillance or Cambridge Analytica on social media. These were cultural moments where suddenly a very large audience realised that these technologies do things that we are probably not aware of and that we have very little control over. At the same time, I think it's too easy to really say, this and that technology is bad, technologies always embed certain values, that we can decide as individuals maybe, or as communities, or as societies. I think in the book that you published in early 2021, Aesthetics of the Commons, there was this one phrase that really stuck with me. You were asking for a call for new social and technological imaginaries. I interpret this as something that, if we can start imagining a different future, or a different way of using technology, we can actually get there but maybe what we lack is imagination because imagination is so much defined by what we use nowadays. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

Cornelia Sollfrank

Yes, that's a good question because if I talk to people, everyone immediately has a lot of criticism about everything but if you ask people, so what is your wish? If you could make a wish for the future, what would it be like? I don't know. People stopped actually thinking about what they really want, what they desire. It's easy to criticise the system as it's going now and there's more and more people doing that. A system that is only oriented towards profit. I think that's the problem. It's not the technology itself, I was never against technology, I think technology is still great, and we will need it for whatever future but if the only value that is related to technology is profit-making, exploitation of people, their data and their work and exploiting the earth, no matter what it costs, and no matter what the consequences are. That is a problem.

The question that arises also is who has control over technology? That's an interesting question, how much control do we have? Can we probably get more control? How would that happen? So far the system is that you get a lot of things for free, or allegedly for free, you pay, I mean, you

are the product in that case, as we know if you get anything for free. So you don't need to think about it, you just use it, you give away everything you create, and you generate. That is the system. I think we need to find ways where we can get into this logic and make people understand that logic and control over technology is something that's a really big problem because as I said before, global tech companies are basically out of control.

When Trump was banned from Twitter, after the storm on the Capitol, everyone was applauding, but then I thought this is awful that this corporation can decide who they want to have on their platform and who they don't want to, you know, this is impossible, that is no way to regulate this. It needs regulation and in all the discussions we had recently, we were kind of coming back to yes, we need more state control, which doesn't make me very optimistic because most politicians have no clue of what's going on.

Learning how things work like making an own server. I absolutely think that is necessary. I mean, you can easily buy server space anywhere and just trust the company to do it, right? Most of them do it, right? But it's also to understand what digital infrastructure is. It's not just the software and the hardware, we rely on the connections and the lines and the infrastructure and on the servers. All the cloud services are nothing but servers that belong to someone else. The moment you start to have your own server and understand how complex it is, how difficult it is, how vulnerable it is, you get an understanding of the complexities that are behind. I think that is the idea and what we have to do. I don't see a revolution that goes like this, expropriation is no problem, so who would be the new owners? I think it's a very long process of learning and I think the most important message, even the symbolic disruptions, that we are doing as artists are important, but as you said in the beginning, I also understand myself and my work as an educator. I think it's incredibly important that people come together and that they share their experiences with knowledge. That they learn things together and they unlearn other things. They become more emancipated towards technology. I think that's the only thing I can see as a path into the future and the imaginaries are, of course, that we can still use technologies for a lot of good things but I think the basic orientation towards exploitation and profit-making has to change, this is not sustainable.