

## *Notes from Field Workers*

### **Laurence Rassel**

#### **Introducing Constant**

Constant (<http://www.constantvzw.org>) is a non-profit association for art and media, based and active in Brussels since 1997. Constant works in the fields of open source, free software, cyber-feminism, social interaction and participation, copyleft and copyright alternatives; the conditions of cultural work. Constant functions as a networked laboratory for a group of artists, designers and researchers. We generate reflection on network culture through the creation of art projects, networks, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Networks and links between cultural producers shed new light on the conditions of work and make analyzing the transfer of digital information necessary.

In the beginning Constant was defined as a platform and network of production/exhibition where a criticism of digital art works such as electronic music, video installations, CD-roms and net art was developed. However, as a consequence of the evolution of the use and exhibition of digital media in Belgium, where an increasing amount of media festivals and exhibitions focused on the spectacle of technology in the form of interactive installations and electronic music (even web pages were brought into museum collections), and as consequence of our own internal evolution - that is, the members and founders of Constant who were mainly curators were replaced by those with an artistic practice - Constant transformed into a 'frame' to raise questions, to experiment with contexts, to open the tools and means of production and to question these tools, means and conditions of work. People didn't come anymore to work 'with' Constant to produce a 'piece', but come to work 'with/in' Constant to challenge and question conditions of exhibition, distribution and production; to question and challenge the *access* to this type of work done with digital media. These questions take their form in public as talks, seminars, workshops, software, actions, and sometimes, of course, exhibitions and concerts. We want to meet, learn from others and share in a public context this exchange of knowledge, experience, technique and process.

#### **Invitation**

This talk structure is born from one of the questions asked by Cornelia Sollfrank in the invitation to this seminar about "our specific use of theory for our practice".

First of all I asked myself what for me (and for us) meant 'theory'? Let's say it means words, sentences, books and people who carry or bring these words and texts. Let's begin by the use of words and of sentences often used as entry doors, as links, as relationships 'in-between'... But in-between what?

## Entry doors

The first example is a website on cyberfeminism (<http://cyberf.constantvzw.org/reload-en.html>) and is an exercise done in the framework of a project named *Samedis* (Saturday) - women and free software.<sup>1</sup> We could even begin by the use of letters and selves, because designing letters and their agency are often inscribed in political projects, in social visions. But let's go back to words and to sentences.

The first cyberfeminist website opens onto sentences that appear and disappear on a black background, accompanied by music which suggests displacement in a network; a network that is formed by sentences out of texts such as *Cyberfeminism with a Difference*<sup>2</sup>, *Zeros and Ones*<sup>3</sup>, a *Cyborg Manifesto*<sup>4</sup> and *The Truth about Cyberfeminism*<sup>5</sup>. I realised that most of these sentences began with the first person either singularly or in plural; next to these specific sentences of course, that settled this space as a gate to what cyberfeminism might be. Concurrently, by this appropriation of theory, we reclaimed an identity AND a space. At that time we wrote:

“So it is an act, to take this word (cyberfeminism) and place it on the web, from the moment we carry it some other people will recognise themselves in it, look at themselves in it. Why: The fact to read certain texts? Let's share these texts. The fact of having met certain women? Let's share these meetings. The fact that we might not think ourselves anymore as beings of nature but as beings recoded by capitalism, technology, medicine, biotechnology and feminism? So what does define us? The fact that we chose the woman-identity as resistance, to share history? We will begin by the fact of sharing these questions.”<sup>6</sup>

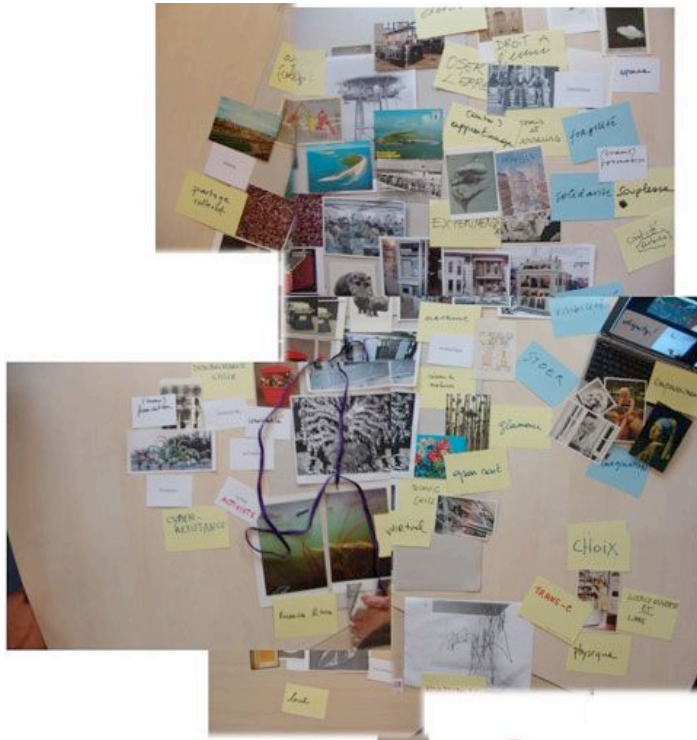
To carry this word was also a performative act, to name oneself as a cyberfeminist. It provoked rejection or interest, but certainly no indifference. To hang certain texts as gatekeepers of our work and spaces helped us to allow other people to enter, to invite people in, to recognise us because certain sentences can be common spaces, known or unknown, spaces to be studied; a parallel to workshops, concerts, building websites... Theoretical activity was never isolated. One year later, we began to translate certain texts quoted in this first entry. This was an invitation to enter into the subject. As part of the introduction that accompanied the publication we wrote: <http://cyberf.constantvzw.org/book/>

“This book is a book of translations. To translate means to transmit certain texts, texts which seem to ask question, to give us view on our actions and images of our position in the future, in the technology, in the society, in the network.”

To translate also meant to appropriate words like ‘embodiment’, ‘empowerment’ and how to ‘render’, to give back these terms as the mirror of our language, of our use and of our situation; translation thought as a space of exchange, as a space of experience. The use of theory at this time in our research was to support investigation into the words and concepts that accompany us in our awareness, and into the use and presence of technology as both tool and environment. Theory, thus, had an immediate impact on our existence and work as cultural producers and as citizens. Theory was giving us words to see, to tell, to show.

Let's go back to words and the assemblage of words.[Fig. 1] Let's stop at what word associations can create. As an example let's take the *Samedis* (Saturdays)-women and free software project (I will come back to the genesis of this project later). This gathered activists, artists and technicians with a desire to build a server whilst learning about free software. After

a few months of workshops, we did an exercise associating words, images and narratives to describe our project of server. First of all, it was impossible to separate what was the experience of collective learning from what would be the collective maintenance of the server, to separate human relationships from technical experiences, and above all to separate the real server building from our imaginary expectations about how it would work and how it would be. If we didn't tell ourselves stories, it would have been impossible to make the list of software that was to be learned and installed.



[Fig. 1]

The words we brought up were: This server is: exercise, right to fail, right to succeed, autonomy, space to dare, learning, solidarity, trans-formation, fragility, suppleness, creativity/fantasy, shared/collective acts, network, visibility, store, empowerment, imagination, choice, trans-e, license open and free, physical, adaptability, local, virtual, technical skills, grassroots, glamour, machines network, technology, civil disobedience, growing, conviviality, activist, cyber-resistance, political, feminist.<sup>7</sup>

It wasn't necessary to discuss the signification of the words because we already had a long common practice that included these words which I will describe later. On the contrary, it was their association to images and the images themselves that proved to be the occasion on which narratives were revealed about the past and future of this server.

Maybe now is the moment to make a detour to other images that highlight domestic altars conceived and maintained by women and in particular the performative nature of these altars. [Fig. 2] They are made of odds and ends, of stuffs, of images, objects that only take or make sense when they are 'activated', when they are used, accompanied with words and gestures. In her book *Beautiful Necessity*, Kay Turner writes the following:

The personal altar invites dialogue: it engages the maker who, moving beyond the viewing of altar images and objects begins to use them, to encounter them, to speak to them. The accumulation of objects is matched by the cumulative effect of ritual gestures and spoken words. Here gestures and speech are substantive, if fleeting; they cannot be separated from the material contents of the altar. In combination, these distinct strategies forge an interactive dynamic which is compelling in both affect and effect. The altar is a prototypical and highly charged performance space, by its very nature reflecting the creative possibilities of symbolic interaction. Nothing is accomplished there without performance. Rituals at the altar reveal women's ability to actually achieve the relationship between distinct entities. Movements, objects and words are in perpetual dialogue.<sup>8</sup>



[Fig. 2]

May I perpetuate this analogy with our use of theory as cogwheel, as a piece in a machine, as a passage; words, sentences and concepts with which we sustain a dialogue, a conversation that helps us to evaluate ourselves and which often allows us to displace ourselves somewhere else unexpected... sometimes we just need a footnote.

### **Embodiment and displacement**

Often this theory is embodied. [Fig. 3]

If at the beginning of our work and questions regarding the impact of technology on cultural production we inscribed words and concepts taken from essays as identity, as invitation and

then as dialogue, we have also invited the bodies and the experienced selves that produced these words, to explain to others about their chosen terms. Often we invite them again and again into non-academic places, into working spaces, training centers, exhibition spaces with artists, with women engaged in training, with sci-fi fans and software programmers. At the same time their interventions mark territories and attract their usual audience to other different spaces.



[Fig. 3]

For several reasons we ourselves go to other peoples' spaces. Constant has an office that can become a workshop space, but at each public moment (besides the web of course which is already a space belonging to someone else and to be negotiated) we enter into contact with different places that we think are open, possible and accessible to our researches. Amongst others, these spaces can be cybercafés, training centers, bookshops, squats and cultural institutions. The purpose of these meetings with other groups is to temporarily implant ourselves and create negotiations, explanations, shared resources and contracts where a common language can be found. We think of our projects with other groups as an open exchange/reverse with the risk to become invisible. This is because we sometimes work at the heart of a structure itself whether that be a network, a discourse or inside the structural spaces of our partners. In the revealing of our sources our activities produce traces, therefore invisibility does not imply disappearance, but the opening of doors with quotes by using weblogs that follow our path and gestures during lectures, workshops that follow our use of free software for design, video, or sound. One can also follow our engagement and thoughts in developing a font or a cartography software; but what imports here to be visible is the project, the trajectory, the process, we don't want to make believe in a magic act of creation, or to make believe in the isolated creation process. We question and teach ourselves in public. I'd like to insist on this perpetual motion due to the 'absence' of permanent place, but also due to some of our practices.

### Instruments

I will take for an example, our decision to use free software<sup>9</sup>. Graham Harwood, an artist-programmer has described Gimp (image editor free software) as "a Photoshop with its guts open", which suggests a live image that software can be more than just a set of easy tools to be used that will function without glitches. Free and open source software is not always 'user-

friendly' in the usual sense of the word. On the one hand 'user-friendly' can mean something else according to the expectations and the skills of the users. On the other hand, like most of open software, 'free' software is 'a work in progress'. It offers an opportunity to create something out of the missing links, out of the hiccups and misunderstandings as the base code is not hidden such as it is in commercial software. Free software allows us to see the guts of our tools, to get rid of the corset, feel the weight and the limits of our technological extensions.

As in the absence of place, our use of free software creates at the same time:

- A link, a dependence to a community of programmers with whom we can be in contact. And the visible doubts, glitches in the software can be the source of meetings and collective works.
- A slowing down in our rhythm of production which allows us to ask (ourselves) questions: Is our work, communication and creation done with software, but also BY software? What happens if our work IS software? How can we think of ourselves outside of their use? How can work, adapt, re-invent, change our tools when their use is restricted by licenses? How can we understand what the software does to the aesthetics of our works. How does our work function if we cannot distance ourselves from it and try other ways of doing? As in slow motion, free software allows us to see ourselves doing.
- The publishing of sources is to share mistakes and solutions. To go back over the traces we leave and we (re)trace or mark. These marks can be images of groups at work, computer code, a revealing of our 'cuisine interne' where we share the products and the recipes which can be reused, modified and distributed. Software in progress is learning in progress and learning in motion.
- But of course this slow motion brings questions of how to combine this collective work, this new time of work as for example, graphic designers? The Open Source publishing team of Constant shares fairy tales and glitches of the line of production. When the team is at work you can follow them on their weblog, it is a group practice.

### **To trace and traces**

With our processes we have multiplied the ways we communicate. From events to portals, weblogs, databases, interviews, diagrams, images, and texts we see and enable to be seen, to research while manipulating data and techniques. These different ways of communication generally follow the specific type of project, and the type of space that the particular project implies will dictate the use of the traces that are expected.

I'd like to focus on one example concerning a work that deals with graphics and the cartography of data. BAM, the Flemish institute for visual, audiovisual and media art<sup>10</sup>, asked our OSP (Open Source Publishing) team to design a publication about the institute activities. Part of the institute's activities is to give information and make visible the visual and media arts scene in Flanders. Constant is of course one of the actors in this field, therefore on the weblog of OSP you could follow the technical adventures to design this book with free software. OSP/Constant was also asked to propose a graphical form to the database, to give a visual and printed form to the data collected by BAM. If the diagrams that were realised were to be published in the book, Constant/OSP wished to add an appendix to them to highlight the process of fabrication to share the questions asked in this process of scrutinizing the database.

*Notes from Field Workers*

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/rassel.html>

The questions were formulated using softwares that revealed as much as the methods used by the institution to collect the data, as they revealed the data collected on the actors of the visual and media field in Flanders. The same way, the various diagrams side by side are an indicator of the questions asked and the different possible standpoints on this data. Design can show or hide a process, and as we know an answer is as important as how a question is asked.

### **Displacement**

It is here in this talk where paths are crossing themselves; I could take two different roads that are always complementary to us. One is the displacement from space to space, the second is the use of writing and reading in our working process. We consider here, reading theory as a work space, as an hospitable space and above all, reading means for us also to put theory at the stake of reality and practice. For example: “Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshiped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they.”<sup>11</sup>

To hang the word cyberfeminist on the web, to translate it and to read the texts produced lead us to take theory for practice, for reality. We went from the web, to translation, to publications. We went from workshop places and image critics to training centers. If digital technology is changing our relation to the world, it implies every woman having relationships with technology: being someone working on the cash machine in a supermarket, being in contact with biotechnology, being in a call centre or making electronic music. In 2001 we entered into a training centre for women that used technology, a training centre for secretaries, admin servers or web designers. We brought in artistic activist practices, theoretical concepts and technical knowledge. We brought our use and understanding of technology.

Feminist history, science, philosophy, cyberfeminist theory and gender politics were all discussed in workshops alongside hardware, networks and the experience off free software use. There were meeting days where concepts and machines were worked, manipulated and rebuilt with the hope of building links between different women’s groups who practiced technology. To ask ourselves who has access to technology, to media and how the representation of technology works, in turn enables us to question gender and the image of women in the media, to ask which technological understandings we share ; it leads us to enter training centres and workplaces for women. This exchange of practices, common creations and organisation of works, lets in traces and a knowledge of how so called ‘immaterial’ labour works, lives and allows us to weave links with people who do not normally pass by the places codified as cultural. If the use of free software and free licence can be considered as a performative and transformative act, in our relations in the engine or ‘between’ the process of our displacement, our feminist position also plays the agitator, the creator of questions, the reconfigurator of fields of creation.

*Digitales*<sup>12</sup> [Fig. 5] were training-centre meeting days, and were exceptional in all senses of the word.

[Fig. 5] An exception in a reality that separates the different users even on the web. It is where we stand to work and to use, it is the language and their goals which are determining the physical and virtual spaces of each of us. Words, uses and spaces only exist when you have met, crossed and opened them, they then make sense and create links to something already

seen and experienced. Interdisciplinary and collective work only exists by practice and repetition. This exception should become a habit; the habit and habitat, a meeting space where responsibility of the meeting is shared; we all had to become both hostess and inhabitants.



[Fig. 4]

In 2006 we organised the last exceptional meeting days [Fig. 6], and taking a group from the origin of the project, began with the aim to build and maintain a feminist server with free software. I refer back to the words shown at the beginning of this talk. They were learned, exchanged and debated and almost six years before becoming the links between functions and practices in the group. I could describe in detail what they do mean in practice, how we deal with different times, different labour definitions, skill sharing, organisational decisions and so on. But as here, I have created a loop in this talk that goes back to the beginning. I would therefore like to end on the function of the texts that we are in turn writing. Texts that often take a grip on quotes to enable a narration and questioning process. These texts that we write, like this one, are mostly the result of invitations we receive to share our experience. These texts are tracing and telling our trajectory more than they are reproducing it. They are at the same time, the repeated attempt to weave links between intuitions, knowledge, tests and meetings. We use theory quoted now and then as a way to mirror, hang or attach. They are like a voice over which accompanies the process, like subtitles. I am thinking of these texts, I am using them as a *bonimenteur* commenting upon scenes of a silent movie, underlining this, forgetting that, looking for her words to accompany the course of her story in front of an audience.

At the difference of information, narration doesn't care about transmitting the pure heart of the event, it incorporates it in the life itself of the one who is telling to communicate it as her own experience to the one who is listening to it. Then the narrator lets her trace on it, like the hand of the ceramist on the argyle vase.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://samedi.collectifs.net>

<sup>2</sup> Rosi Braidott, 'Cyberfeminism with a Difference' (2002)

[www.ucm.es/info/rqtr/biblioteca/ciberespacio%20glbt/Cyberfeminism%20with%20a%20difference.pdf](http://www.ucm.es/info/rqtr/biblioteca/ciberespacio%20glbt/Cyberfeminism%20with%20a%20difference.pdf) [Accessed 1 April 2009]

<sup>3</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,' in

*Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

<sup>5</sup> An intervention by Cornelia Sollfrank, Constantvzw, 1999

<sup>6</sup> Sophia: Nat Muller, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Laurence Rassel (eds.), *Prenons le mot cyberféminisme*, Network of

Belgian Feminist Studies, 1999, [www.sophia.be](http://www.sophia.be)

<sup>7</sup> Mots associés par les femmes des ateliers *Samedis femmes et logiciels libres*, le 30 juin 2007:

<http://samedi.collectifs.net/wiki/index.php?n=Traces.SamediNo7-070630>

<sup>8</sup> Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 130.

<sup>9</sup> Free software is a matter of the users' freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. More precisely, it refers to four kinds of freedom, for the users of the software:

\* The freedom to run the program, for any purpose (freedom 0).

\* The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

\* The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor (freedom 2).

\* The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits (freedom 3). Access to the source code is a precondition for this . See: [gnu.org](http://gnu.org)

<sup>10</sup> BAM is an independent and intermediary structure, which is positioned between the field and the policy. From a base of

in-depth knowledge of both the field and the policy, it provides information, furthers development, collaboration and

networking - both within the field and crossing boundaries into other disciplines and fields - and it is in dialogue with the

various governments. BAM is not an interest group and, contrary to the government, is no channel for subsidies.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* , p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> [http://digitales.constantvzw.org/media\\_archive/](http://digitales.constantvzw.org/media_archive/)

<sup>13</sup> Félix Guattari, *Les trois ecologies* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), p. 69. [My translation].