

## Human Rights and Cyberfeminism

**W**hy should a female western cyberfeminist art collective join a grassroots demand for intersex human rights? What can we contribute and what do we gain from such an affiliation?

In 1998 the subRosa art collective uncomfortably adopted the label “cyberfeminist” after some debate amongst collective members. The group formed in the context of a largely white and patriarchal technophilic atmosphere of a prestigious U.S. research university. From its beginning, the collective was interested in producing projects (discourse, artwork, actions) examining the impact of new information communication- (ICT) and bio-technologies on women’s lives, bodies, and work. The term ‘cyberfeminist,’ novel at the time, was coined by feminists working in Australia and western Europe and indebted to Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.”

yes

Our hesitations stemmed from our perceptions and raw personal experiences of the limits of cyberfeminist inquiry at the time. Most notably, we felt that cyberfeminists, while raising important questions about female access to and authorship of ‘cyberspaces’ and touting so-called liberatory gender fluidity in cyberspace, were overlooking the impact & experience of “cyber” outside of their own race, class, & geographical consciousness. Both ICT and biotechnologies rely heavily on the de-valued labor and body parts of females, and this fact was typically absent in much cyberfeminist discourse at the time.

As newly collaborating feminists struggling to be heard in our privileged corner of a high-tech university, and as in-

tergenerational & interracial thinkers from different socio economic backgrounds, we were familiar with many of the triumphs (improvements to women's health care and career opportunities) and pitfalls (exclusion of women of color) of earlier western feminisms. Ultimately, we challenged ourselves to adopt the label and add to the discourse. We still struggle with cyberfeminist (and feminist) movement as artists, women, and educators. However; we view these struggles and our many privileges as intimately connected to the labor and bodies of many we may never meet.

subRosa is committed to feminist affiliation across categories of embodiment as a tool for change. We favor affirming tactics of anti-discipline over strategies for coping with inequities, whenever possible.

yes

As Kim Hall points out in her critique of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, "...identity matters politically, but not because it is a foundational ground that unites members of an oppressed group across their differences. Rather, identity is politically useful to the extent that it is a continually negotiated site for the disarticulation of historical and cultural forces that have shaped its meaning, as well as a consciously forged site of shared struggle against oppression."<sup>1</sup>

Hall criticizes the Monologues' rootedness in the vagina as an authentication of femaleness, and also challenges the Intersex Society of North America's (ISNA) critique of the play's treatment of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). She shows how both Ensler and ISNA challenge hegemonic masculinity while also reinscribing it (and its inherent sexism, ableism and racism).

"...to engage in the project of reclaiming the vagina [ed; as Ensler's work does] without simultaneously adopting a strategy of disidentification regarding the reality of the vagina does not challenge the social, political, historical,

The Birth of Julius Caesar



yes

and economic context that imbues the vagina with meaning....The categories woman and vagina enable feminists to name the bad things that happen to those who are perceived as women and to that which is perceived as vagina. Female body parts and women are real in the sense that they are lived effects of power in a sexist, racist, classist, ableist, heterosexist society. The answer...is not to abandon all references to vaginas or women or race...[but to] adopt strategies of resistance that have the potential to change our relationship to the female body and the category woman.”<sup>2</sup> Citing Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault among others, Hall calls for a “queer feminist strategy of disidentification” with the vagina. For example, one might

redefine the vulva as clitoris and disidentify with “vagina” because it is the “sheath” for the penis and the birth canal and therefore the sign of heterosexual normative femaleness. Persons identifying themselves as woman who do not have (or want) a vagina, but who have a clitoris affirm sexual dimorphism.

If hetero-normative [genital] disidentification is one strategy for resisting patriarchal oppression, could disidentification with hegemonic social divisions of race and ability also be powerful strategies for change?

In her essay “Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment” Maria Fernandez discusses the importance of examining how bodies perform racism in social settings. “As a tool of validation for an established social order, racism forms part of our historical, social and cultural legacy.”<sup>3</sup> Racism must be viewed as a complex of embodied practices and cannot be simply overcome through theorizing.

yes

Hybridity and the renunciation of racial categories are strategies for ending racism but, Fernandez argues, they are not enough. “By acknowledging the power of embodied, nonverbal practices, cyberfeminists can subvert and deploy established forms of discipline to form and strengthen positive, powerful alliances.”<sup>4</sup>

In an issue of *ISNA News*, Lynelle Stephani Long reminds readers that there is not a lot of information available about the experiences of intersex people of color. She asks, “why are there so few people of color who are also intersex out? Why aren’t there more activists of color working with ISNA to help end genital mutilation?”<sup>5</sup> Long links her struggles as a woman of color with her struggles as a person born intersex, citing the powerful mythologizing of black sexuality as a major barrier to self esteem.

subRosa allies itself to human rights movements for

intersex people and believes that intersex persons should work in solidarity against human rights violations based on race and disability.



1. Hall, Kim Q., "Queerness, Disability, and The Vagina Monologues," *Hypatia*, winter 2005 (Bloomington). <http://proquest.umi.com/> (Proquest document i.d. 784493211, retrieved 17 April 2005).
2. *ibid*
3. Fernandez, Maria "Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment," *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* (Autonomedia: 2002). [http://refugia.net/domainerrors/1b\\_cyber.html](http://refugia.net/domainerrors/1b_cyber.html) (11 May 2005).
4. *ibid*
5. Long, Lynnell Stephani, "Race and the Intersexed," *ISNA News, summer 2003*. <http://www.isna.org/> (12 May 2005).

**yes**