

“My body? Me but always different!”: Restructuring Identity through an Excess of Humor in the *World of Female Avatars*

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“The representation of women’s identities through avatars was given by the submitter, through their images and text ... It was already there.”¹ – Evelin Stermitz

The above quote is taken from an interview with the internet artist Evelin Stermitz regarding her net.art project, the *World of Female Avatars* (2005).² In her project, Stermitz took raw photographs supplied upon her request and also by online submitters, along with a short text response to a prompt, and reconfigured them into new works of digitally edited art. These reconfigured works of art are the titular avatars, or visual representations of people that are utilized as markers of identity in virtual spaces.³ Avatars, which are typically studied under the umbrella of communications or media studies, are generally not analyzed through the lens of art history.⁴ Stermitz, however, uses internet art as a framework in conjunction with avatars as a representation strategy to reconsider how these women view themselves and their body.

One such set of images provided to Stermitz can be seen in Figure 1. These three images emblemize common visual motifs of womanhood. The top left image depicts a blonde woman with her back turned to the camera, and her body is positioned diagonally across the frame. She is wearing a black crop-top, highlighting a portion of her midriff and her backside, and long, blonde hair falls straight down her back. The bottom left image depicts a side profile of a woman's body in a pink top and jeans. Furthermore, her chest and midriff are highlighted, and her face and lower body are obscured. These “markers” of femininity are sexualized, and her

¹ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 6, 2025.

² Stermitz defined the work as a net.art project in an interview on April 6, 2025.

³ Mark Stephen Meadows, I, avatar: The culture and consequences of having a second life, (New Riders Publishing, 2008), 15.

⁴ Kristine L. Nowak., and Jesse Fox . “Avatars and Computer-Mediated Communication: A Review of the Definitions, Uses, and Effects of Digital Representations on Communication.” *Review of Communication Research* 6 (2018): 33. <https://doi.org/10.12840/issn.2255-4165.2018.06.01.015>.

identity is obfuscated. Clearly, who the woman is in these photos does not matter: what matters is the woman's sexual appeal. The right image shows a woman's blue eye bathed in an overexposed, harsh light. Stermitz reconfigures these three images into an avatar which, in this case, is a blue, angel-like creature [Figure 2].

The representational strategy of the avatar, which falls under the general category of new media art, is often used to prompt investigations of identity.⁵ Avatars are intrinsically tied to identity and representation, and are often analyzed in communication studies, defined as a "... digital representation of a human user that facilitates interaction with other users, entities, or the environment."⁶ However, Stermitz defines an avatar as "just an image circulating in digital space," and this broader definition is critical to understanding how she utilizes the concept.⁷ Through a communications studies based approach, one would be hard-pressed to understand these avatars as truly *avatars*, since they are not used by the users to interact with each other in the net.art project. Therefore, Stermitz' understanding of the avatar allows for greater flexibility. Since avatars are online representations of what people want to look like online, while they can be similar to the person's physical appearance, they are often more similar to how the person *wants* to be perceived.

Stermitz's *World of Female Avatars* functioned as a digital art project accessible through a web platform. Stermitz then states that the exhibition is concerned with how "women always have been and are strongly connected to their body in a positive and/or negative sense."⁸ The

⁵ New media is defined here as: "... a comprehensive term that encompasses art forms that are either produced, modified, and transmitted by means of new media/digital technologies or, in a broader sense, make use of "new" and emerging technologies that originate from a scientific, military, or industrial context"

⁶ Nowak and Fox, "Avatars", 34.

⁷ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 6, 2025. The full interview is attached in the appendix.

⁸ Stermitz, Evelin. 2008. "*World of Female Avatars* an Artistic Online Survey on the Female Body in Times of Virtual Reality." *Leonardo* 41 (5): 538–39. <https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2008.41.5.538>, 539.

idea of representations of the body, and the idea of virtual spaces liberating the body, are among the key concepts Stermitz outlines in this opening page. Notably, the site grounds the project within the theories of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Paul Virilio [Figure 3]. In particular, Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry is crucial to understanding Stermitz's role and intervention as feminist critique. In their seminal text "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Adorno and Horkheimer argue that rather than enriching the general population, general mass media now (such as television, movies, and music) serves to deliver consumable media goods that both encourage people to both become consumers in the capitalist market and pacify society with low-brow content.⁹ As Adorno and Horkheimer put it,

A constant sameness governs the relationship to the past as well. What is new about the phase of mass culture compared with the late liberal stage is the exclusion of the new. The machine rotates on the same spot. While determining consumption it excludes the untried as a risk. The movie-makers distrust any manuscript which is not reassuringly backed by a bestseller. Yet for this very reason there is never-ending talk of ideas, novelty, and surprise, of what is taken for granted but has never existed. Tempo and dynamics serve this trend. Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving. For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear. Any additions to the well-proven culture inventory are too much of a speculation.¹⁰

Essentially, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that producers now focus on creating content that is suitable for specific niches of consumers to maximize profits, rather than taking risks to create genuinely creative or insightful content.¹¹ As such, mass-produced media becomes almost identical, as instead of focusing on creating exciting new material, producers focus on how to extend the most pleasure to the audience with the least amount of innovation or investment.¹² It

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2. "Marked differentiation such as those of A and B films... depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended... Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type."

¹² Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry," 9.

is worth noting that Adorno and Horkheimer wrote from a perspective centering on their experiences as immigrants to the United States.¹³ When understanding Stermitz's project, it is critical to also point out that, as cultural psychologists put it, women are passively persuaded by this aforementioned media industry to view themselves in an objectifying way, or a way that views their self-worth as how appealing they can be to a male audience.¹⁴ This concept is known as *gendered enculturation*, with enculturation being an anthropological concept, or "the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values."¹⁵ I will analyze the *World of Female Avatars* (2005) as a lens to examine how Stermitz utilizes internet art and the representational strategy of the avatar in identity-driven ways to critique and reinterpret representations of the body. As I will argue, Stermitz intervenes through a strategy of recodifying female identity into something over the top, ridiculous, or humorous, thus working *against* women's enculturation by the culture industry.

Interfacing the *World of Female Avatars*

In the net.art project's main page, the user navigates by clicking on floating purple orbs that scatter throughout the frame of view [Figure 4]. Upon clicking on one of these orbs, an avatar and the accompanying text submitted by one of the exhibition's participants appear on the user's screen, and this user-driven process is how the art of the avatar-based exhibition unfolds.¹⁶ In doing so, the user is able to engage more deeply with the project, and they gain more agency than if the images appeared through some other form. The *World of Female Avatars* features

¹³ Ibid, 20.

¹⁴ L. D. Worthy, Trisha Lavigne, and Fernando Romero, *Culture and Psychology: How People Shape and Are Shaped by Culture* (Maricopa Open Digital Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Crucially, since Adobe Flash was discontinued in 2020 and, since that was the software skeleton of the art project, the art project itself (the webpage with the floating orbs) no longer functions without the use of an online plug-in.

about fifty avatars that all vary in content.¹⁷ As stated earlier, individuals would submit up to four images and a text blurb through the prompt on the website and Stermitz would then assemble them all into a single image, or the avatar. In this paper, I will be going through three case studies of raw images assembled into a complete, edited image: *Blue Woman* [Figure 2], *Four Legged Woman* [Figure 5], and *Watching Woman* [Figure 6].¹⁸ These images serve to demonstrate the humor Stermitz implants into these avatars: one of a literal blue angel, one with a woman's leg replicated four times in a fetishistic fashion, and one representing the literal scopophilic gaze.

The first case study, *Blue Woman*, mentioned at the start of this essay, depicts a navy blue, angelic figure. Stermitz has taken the top left image of Figure 1, the woman standing diagonally across the frame, and has edited it. Strange, fleshy wings stretch out of the edited avatar's shoulders, each with bulbous eyeballs inside of them. The previously described markers of femininity – the chest, midriff, and hair – are reworked into the new avatar, a representation of the woman. The accompanying text submitted is also critical to understand the avatar. This woman submitted the following response to the prompt, which asked the submitters, “What do you think about your body?”.¹⁹

“a female body . . . became more and more an object than something human ... how should a body look like? and why don't we give a damn about what others think, our body should look like? are we so much self-inconfident [sic]? where is our strength? I am fed up with trying to be perfect and to have the perfect figure, just always this disgusting pressure . . . I really came to a conclusion I swear, from now on I will always follow this one: I JUST LOVE MYSELF”²⁰

¹⁷ Stermitz does not provide the exact number in the original project or any supplementary media.

¹⁸ These are not actual titles of the works, as Stermitz did not provide those, but rather strictly descriptive titles.

¹⁹ From the *World of Female Avatars* “Submit” webpage.

²⁰ Taken from Stermitz' *World of Female Avatars*.

A clear irony surfaces here: the woman submitting seems aware that she *should* love herself, and that there are misogynistic, unfair double standards applied to women having to surveil their own appearances. Yet, the images she submitted are objectifying, “aesthetic” images of the female body. Here, it is helpful to interrogate the prompt Stermitz provided, “What do you think about your body?” This paradoxical response is, as I argue, a result of the earlier discussed pervasive enculturation of women’s beliefs regarding their bodies through popular mass media. Thus, I argue that many women’s provided images in response to the prompt Stermitz provided are submitting images of what they want *other* people to see their body as. This concept harks back to Laura Mulvey’s hugely influential cinema studies essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she outlines the male gaze, or the fact that women are often depicted in the arts and media from the perspective of an imagined heterosexual man.²¹ Mulvey argues that the male gaze is pervasive in popular media, such as Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 film *Vertigo*.²² The male gaze, in turn, connects back to Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument. The male gaze pervades the culture industry: much of common media is dominated by misogynistic portrayals of women.²³ It is unclear whether the women featured in Stermitz’s piece really think this way – choosing these images that depict women’s clothing and closeups of their body – or if this is how hegemonic and misogynistic culture causes them to view themselves.

One main critique of both Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry and Mulvey’s male gaze is that they overestimate the uniformity of popular media and underestimate the imagined viewer’s autonomy and awareness.²⁴ One scholar, Linda Williams, has raised a critique against

²¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ Worthy, “Psychology.”

²⁴ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1212758>.

this negative blanketing of popular media, and argues that viewers, and in particular women, may find complex pleasure or agency in “excessive” genres like horror, pornography, and melodrama.²⁵ This idea of excess is pervasive in Stermitz’s project. Her avatars are over the top, often mocking perceived ideas of female sexuality, and I argue that this excess is being utilized in a similar way to how Williams identifies excess as functioning in popular media. For an example of popular media, she argues that *Steels Magnolias* (1989), a film often critiqued for its melodrama and sentimentalism, engages female viewers who identify with “powerful matriarchs .. the exhilaration and triumph of survival”²⁶, and that, most importantly, “identification is neither fixed nor entirely passive.”²⁷ Rather than a melodramatic film like *Steel Magnolias*, which Williams refers to as a “weepy,” being inherently misogynistic and low brow, Williams suggests that these types of films actively engage the viewer through their excess of emotion.²⁸ Though Williams’ work focuses on film genres, her framework of ‘excess’ as a feminist site of identification and agency can be extended to Stermitz’s net.art project, which similarly engages spectacle and surveillance through the construction of avatars for an onlookers viewing pleasure.

The body is particularly crucial to Williams’s argument she is making. In the three types of popular media she analyzes, horror, pornography, and melodrama, female bodies are often the crux or focus of the film, TV show, or video game.²⁹ As Williams states, “The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping.”³⁰ Similarly, Stermitz has an

²⁵ Williams, “Film Bodies,” 2.

²⁶ Ibid, 8.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

analogous interest in the body, stating that “[her] task is to put [the] body into a flexible controlling position and to liberate the body from compulsory prescriptions of what a body is.”³¹ Thus, the avatar, which is an extension of the body, seeks to liberate the physical body from the idea of what a body *should* look like. Here, I apply Williams’s identification of excess as pleasure and empowerment onto Stermitz’s net.art project, and argue that Stermitz finds power through pleasure and excess. She reconfigures avatars in excessive, ironic ways to push back against gendered enculturation.

A “common sense” reading of the net.art project may find it a bit uncomfortable: after all, the viewer must click through female avatars to view their thoughts about their bodies. However, Stermitz allows the viewer to both engage with the pleasure of excessive visual editing while taking in and understanding the deeper critiques both she and the participants are making about how society views the female body. Furthermore, humor itself has been identified as integral to both third wave feminism and media coming out of the movement.³² Scholars such as Kathleen Karyln argue that women in the third wave were key demographics for producers to appeal to, thus, the interests of women began to influence popular media.³³ As such, humor both integrated into mainstream feminism and became a prominent tool for feminist creatives, such as Stermitz, to leverage.

In *Blue Woman*, as mentioned, the previously mentioned markers of sexuality have been reworked into the new avatar Stermitz has created [Figure 2]. The bare skin in the base images

³¹ Stermitz, “*World of Female Avatars*”, 538.

³² Megan Cunningham, “Scream, Popular Culture and Feminism’s Third Wave: ‘I’m Not My Mother,’” *Genders*, no. 38 (August 1, 2003), <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2003/08/01/scream-popular-culture-and-feminisms-third-wave-im-not-my-mother>.

³³ Ibid, “Girls now control enough money to attract attention as a demographic group. This may or may not represent an advance in terms of girls’ actual social power, but it does indicate that girls are being listened to by cultural producers who are taking them and their tastes very seriously.”

provided now looks more like a belt adorning the jeans. The image of the chest has been completely removed, and the bright eye from the base image has been reworked into the wings of flesh that jut out of the figure. There is a humorous aspect to the woman seemingly now wearing a belt. The submitter, who expressed that she wants to be seen for herself and not her body, has had her base images (images that ostensibly describe her view of her body) reworked into this off-putting avatar, one that resists objectification. The strange wings and blue wash of the avatar are, to a common viewer, perhaps a bit ridiculous. The original woman, an ordinary teen or twenty-something, has been turned into an alien-angel like creature, awash in blue light and adorned with strange, fleshy wings.

Stermitz's editing is considered a form of assemblage, which, I argue, builds on the scholarship of Christine Liao, one of the few scholars who has explicitly linked avatars to both communication and artistic expression. She outlines the avatar's connection to art in three main ways.³⁴ First, that the avatar creation process can be viewed as a form of assemblage art (or as she claims, presenting identity), second that mixed-reality usages of avatar art can be understood as performance art (making identity), and third, that broadly, avatars can be seen as a subject of art, and are often displayed in internet exhibitions (performing identity).³⁵ For the purposes of my argument, the avatar creation process as related to assemblage, or creating identity, is most resonant and applicable. In Stermitz's case, the assemblage of avatars is allowing her to create this form of excess, or form of ridiculous humor visually.

Stermitz's interest in feminist critiques and reinterpretations of representations of the body falls within a lineage of feminist artists working in new media such as photography, video

³⁴ Christine Liao, "Art Medium Too: Avatar, Art, and Assemblages," *Journal for Virtual Worlds Research* 6, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v6i2.7049>, 2.

³⁵ Liao, "Art Medium Too", 3.

art, and internet art. Feminist artists are often drawn to these mediums because of their potential for self-fashioning identity.³⁶ Self-fashioning, a term originally coined in 1980 by the literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt, refers to the idea of how one constructs their own identity and public persona according to a set of societal standards.³⁷ The control of one's own appearance and how one appears to *others* is the crux of self-fashioning, and the new media allow for marginalized artists to both include histories and control representations of themselves in ways they had not been afforded previously.³⁸ Therefore, I argue Stermitz's interest in the avatar as a representational strategy, and a digitally edited image, is intrinsically tied to these ideas of identity and cultural construction.

A clear departure, which is necessary to acknowledge, between avatar art and forms of new media often associated with identity (such as photography and video art) is that avatar art is, generally, completely hosted online. This difference between certain forms of new media art and avatar art is of particular focus in this essay, and the difference hinges on the fact that online art projects allow user interaction. While many forms of new media are positioned to comment on identity, the user-driven way in which avatar art functions makes it ripe for further analysis than it has been given in previous discussions of new media, especially in viewing it as a form of art that engages with identity-based topics. Additionally, the identity-driven way in which avatars have been thought through makes it especially relevant in terms of analysis based on enculturation.³⁹

³⁶ Maria Fernanda Barriga, "Deconstructing Feminist Art and the Evolution of New Media" (Master's thesis, Prescott College, 2016), 7, ProQuest (10255533).

³⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁸ Ina Loewenberg, "Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography," *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 399-408. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178687>, 399.

³⁹ Nowak and Fox, "Avatars", 35.

Creating the *World of Female Avatars*

The *World of Female Avatars* developed out of an analog concept, a photographic project commissioned by the European Cultural Foundation when Stermitz was an artist in residence at the Art Center Slovenia in 2005.⁴⁰ Stermitz conceived of the project as part of the lineage of the net.art movement, which refers to both the medium of internet art but also a particular group of avant-garde artists that used the internet in experimental and novel ways.⁴¹ The term arose in 1995 after one of the pioneering figures of net.art, Vuk Cosic (born 1966), received a file that was completely corrupted, and one of the only recognizable terms he could see was ‘net.art’.⁴² For example, Antonio Muntadas’s (born 1942) *The File Room* (1994) [Figure 8, Figure 9], one of the earliest projects of internet art, was an extensive worldwide and collaborative archive pertaining to censorship.⁴³ The project solicited submissions from anonymous users and categorized them by date, location, medium, and other properties. A common theme characterizing these early works of net.art, such as *The File Room*, are the fact that they use art and the internet to display data in, for the time period, unique ways. *The File Room* is a sort of online archive, a digital archive, that encourages the viewer to click around and engage with the work.⁴⁴ Another example of this early net.art is Maciej Wisniewski’s *Turnstile II* (1998) [Figure 10], which was essentially a form of artistic spying.⁴⁵ Chat room conversations from across the internet were harvested and compiled into the artist project, commenting on surveillance and utilizing the constantly changing data-scape of the internet.⁴⁶ The unique ways in which these

⁴⁰ Stermitz, Evelin. 2008. “*World of Female Avatars* an Artistic Online Survey on the Female Body in Times of Virtual Reality.” *Leonardo* 41 (5): 538–39. <https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2008.41.5.538>, 539.

⁴¹ Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce* (Tate Publishing, 2003), 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁶ Stallabrass, *Internet Art*, 30.

two artists play with data, or code and display data in a creative way and artistically engaging manner, ties into Stermitz's work. Her net.art project is playing with data in inventive ways, with the viewer accessing the project through clicking on small, pink orbs in a way similar to a video game. It also serves an archival purpose, with these women's identities filed away into the internet forever, much like Muntadas's early work with the internet. Stermitz also looks towards other net.art projects and artists, and I would argue her work is analogous to artists such as Wisniewski given their similarities.⁴⁷

Stermitz, in an interview, stated that her project was intended to be constructed within the cyberfeminist net.art movement.⁴⁸ While net.art is commonly seen as a masculine movement of art, there were in fact many women involved with the movement, with archives such as the Cyberfeminist Index chronicling women's involvement with the movement.⁴⁹ The influential feminist art collective, VNS Matrix, and cultural theorist Sadie Plant, coined the term "cyberfeminism" in the early 1990s. One scholar, Mindy Seu, defines cyberfeminism as follows:

"the word "cyberfeminism" takes on its prefix "cyber"-recast from Cybernetics, a 1948 book by Norbert Wiener, and "cyberspace," from William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*--as a provocation. The word initially stood for a critique of the sci-fi landscapes of the 1980s, stocked with and characterized by cyberbabes and fembots. It denoted the ways various women and marginalized communities were imagining how a reoriented cyberspace could look."⁵⁰

In turn, cyberfeminism is rooted in Donna Haraway's framework presented in her influential 1985 essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto."⁵¹ These traditions, as Haraway argues, have led to Western culture viewing machinery and nature as two opposed groups, and this viewpoint has

⁴⁷ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 26, 2025.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Mindy Seu, Cyberfeminism Index, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://www.cyberfeminismindex.com/>.

⁵⁰ Mindy Seu, *Cyberfeminism Index* (New York: Inventory Press, 2022), 11.

⁵¹ Donna J. 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).

been disastrous for women. In particular, she points out that the “self” of marginalized groups is often fashioned in relation to hegemonic groups, and in addition society more broadly is built around these dichotomous pairings.⁵² One of her overarching claims is that marginalized groups would benefit from a fluid way of viewing these dichotomies through utilizing technology, and that essentialist viewpoints (such as pairing men and women against each other) are not productive.⁵³ Likewise, the *World of Female Avatars* is a female-centric project, one that does not consider a dichotomous ‘male’ viewpoint in favor of centering the female. Many other cyberfeminist projects and artworks were different from this. For example, VNS Matrix, one of the most influential cyberfeminist groups, was created in 1991 and was made up of the artists Francesca da Rimini, Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Virginia Barratt.⁵⁴ One of their most influential works is their video game *All New Gen* (1992), in which the player is a “DNA Slut” battling the “Circuit Boy,” a “techno-bimbo” [Figure 11].⁵⁵ Here, both the grossness and humor in these over-the-top artworks ring similarly to Stermitz’s avatars, but with a direct confrontation between man and woman, unlike Stermitz’s work which focuses on female perspectives. However, much like Stermitz’s work, these cyberfeminist works center around excess: the excess of women’s bodies, of humor, and of drama.

A more analogous cyberfeminist work to Stermitz’s is *D/t\P disturb.the.peace [angry women]* [Figure 12] by Jess Loseby, which was also created in 2005.⁵⁶ Loseby’s net.art project has a similar interface and usage of moving dots which the user clicks on, though Stermitz said that though she submitted a work to Loseby’s project, she was not aware that the two were so

⁵² Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto,” 7.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Mindy Seu, *Cyberfeminism Index* (New York: Inventory Press, 2022), 52.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 202.

similar visually.⁵⁷ Stermitz's work featured in *D/t/P disturb.the.peace [angry women]* that the website has titled as *IDONTWANTTOBEA* [Figure 13]. In *IDONTWANTTOBEA*, the words "I don't want to be a" flash on the screen in bright pink letters. After the "a", a photograph of a blurred woman appears, [Figure 14], and the following words flash back and forth with a new image of a blurred woman each time. The words are as follows: "puppet, trendy baby, fashion victim, barbie doll, house wife, beauty queen, super model, sex object, shopping maniac, sex crime victim, long legged blonde, wife of a man ?" Clearly, Stermitz is involved in cyberfeminist discourse and art beyond her own, and other cyberfeminist projects have informed and shaped her work.

Stermitz's *World of Female Avatars* was initially envisioned as her photographing and interviewing women about their relationship with their body.⁵⁸ The artist ran into issues with getting these women to fully express their relationship with their body, which is further explained in an article she wrote about her project, "In the majority of interview cases it came to a description of the negative remarks viewing the own body as an object of beauty."⁵⁹ Stermitz additionally found that many women had never thought about their body outside of its sexual worth.⁶⁰ Stermitz said for many women, it was hard to talk about the body critically because, "the awareness of the body is mainly unconscious in daily routine."⁶¹ One of the aims of the net.art project was to address this unawareness of the body and bring the body into critical discussion. After these previously mentioned issues with analog media began to arise, she chose

⁵⁷ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 26, 2025.

⁵⁸ Stermitz, "World," 539.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ As per Stermitz in her talk at Powers of Projection: Contemporary Art & Cybernetics - IEEE SSIT 21CW2021, <https://ieeetv.ieee.org/video/powers-of-projection-contemporary-art-cybernetics-ieee-ssit-21cw2021>

⁶¹ Stermitz, "World," 539.

to make the transition from analog media to digital, and this transition is crucial for understanding the end result of the project. As Stermitz herself states in reference to her body of work, “The photographic image was important [to me] at the beginning, but then just the image alone was too quiet and not vivid for my aims.”⁶² As with many other feminist artists working in new media, Stermitz found internet art to be liberating, and for her, analog media lacked the dynamism to reach her aims of rewriting the female body.⁶³ Thus, the project went online as a way to both circumvent the issues Stermitz was running into but also to elevate the project's scope.

The *World of Female Avatars* began with an open call that Stermitz sent to a mailing list of feminist intellectuals and artists she knew called FACES.⁶⁴ The open call, as mentioned, asked women to submit four images and accompanying text responding to the question “What do you think about your body?” After receiving the four images, Stermitz would assemble them into a collage and create an avatar out of them.⁶⁵ These responses were transformed into the interactive internet art project by Stermitz and three additional programmers: Jure Kodzoman, Ljiljana Perkovic, and Loritz Zbigniew. The project was developed under ArtNetLab, a collaborative laboratory hosted by the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, pairing the university’s Academy of Fine Arts and Design with their Faculty of Information and Computer Science.⁶⁶ Therefore, a central confluence of the net.art project is this conjunction of art, design, and technology, in addition to the lineage of net.art projects that Stermitz is working alongside to assemble her avatars. In an interview, Stermitz clarified that all the submissions to the project were in English,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Stermitz, “World,” 539.

⁶⁴ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 6, 2025.

⁶⁵ Stermitz at the Powers of Projection: Contemporary Art & Cybernetics talk.

⁶⁶ Stermitz, “*World of Female Avatars*”, 538.

and though participants submitted globally, primarily they came from Europe and the U.S.⁶⁷

Adorno, Horkheimer, and Williams's arguments all mainly deal with Hollywood and the U.S. dominated film industry, but given the grasp these films have over the entire industry, I would argue that they are still applicable to international viewers.

As the project went online, the women submitting images agreed to share something different, rather than simply their likeness. The exchange is now characterized by the women submitting images that, ostensibly, describe how they view their bodies. The individual submitting is sharing these personal photographs, whether they depict themselves or are simply important to them, to Stermitz for her to edit. It is worth considering, as explored previously, whether these women view these images as truly representative of their bodies or as others perceive their bodies. While this is impossible to be truly certain of or discern, it is a nuance one must be aware of. Huge amounts of influence through advertising, film, and media cause women to view their bodies in relation to how men view them rather than how they truly view themselves.⁶⁸ This tension is explored both through their submissions and the assemblages Stermitz creates out of them. For example, in one submission, Stermitz only received one image [Figure 7].

The initial image depicts a photograph of a reclining woman, cropped at the neck, so that her head (and therefore identity) is not visible. Instead, the viewer's attention focuses on her legs and feet, which take up the foreground. She is wearing a red shirt with a black 86 in the center of the shirt. Her neck juts out of the shirt and falls slightly: she is not holding her head all the way

⁶⁷ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 26, 2025.

⁶⁸ Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, "Looking Good Versus Feeling Good: An Investigation of Media Frames of Health and Appearance and Their Effects on Women's Body-Related Self-Perceptions," *Sex Roles* 56, no. 1–2 (2007): 46.

up. The image is almost pornographic: her perfectly shaven legs frame where her genitalia would be, inviting the viewer to peer in and objectify the woman in the photograph. However, the framed space is a dark, blank, void. The photograph is an excellent representation of the tension the net.art project is exploring: this image is likely not what a woman truly thinks embodies herself, but rather how the media and culture industry have enculturated her into viewing herself. This is reinforced by her identity being concealed by the image crop. Here, the identity or any personal details of the woman depicted are not considered. Rather, the sexualized legs of the woman are the forefront of the image, not the identity or any other discerning qualities of the pictured woman.

In Stermitz's assemblage, *Four Legged Woman* [Figure 5], the female figure has been separated from the background entirely, floating in black space. Rather than simply cropping the head out, the head has been completely decapitated and removed from the torso, which further stresses the idea that the woman's identity is not important here, but rather her body. However, Stermitz has duplicated the leg four times, rendered it into grayscale, and inverted the values of the leg. The color of the shirt has been warped into a more neon shade, and there is a large amount of black negative space that surrounds the floating legs and shirt. The original depth in the image, of the paired legs framing the genitalia, has been lost in the new avatar. Rather, the image is much flatter, and the dimensionality of the original image is not as present. The legs are all paired in an almost fetishistic fashion, a sentiment Stermitz has stressed when discussing the collage.⁶⁹ Now, the woman is essentially all legs – if people find legs attractive, there is a lot to work with here. Stermitz stresses the sexual sentiment that legs carry by duplicating them over and over, but in doing so has ironically stripped the legs of their sexual value. An excess of irony

⁶⁹ Stermitz at the Powers of Projection: Contemporary Art & Cybernetics talk.

is now represented in the work along with a biting witty excess of sexual pleasure, a mass of legs. Rather than appearing sleek and clean-shaven, the legs are now drained of color with a gaudy visual noise applied. They are no longer a sexualized aspect of the image: now, they block the woman's crotch completely now. In addition, the gap between the legs has been completely closed by the additional legs Stermitz has added.

Through this excessive form of visual humor, such as the woman's head literally being completely removed, Stermitz has added protective layers to the original image. By removing the head, she acknowledges the fact that the viewer does not care for the identity or any meaningful qualities of the woman, rather, her legs are the sole focus. Stermitz seems to be aware of the male gaze here and is calling it out through the use of excessive 'pleasure', through the form of literally multiplied legs, and humor. Additionally, the image invokes the idea of the monstrous, which is particularly apt when analyzing this feminist net.art project. Since the early 20th century, as women began to get more and more power in common society, men responded by characterizing women as monstrous in literature and media.⁷⁰ For example, scholar Rosi Braidotti argues that the tie between the monstrous and the feminine is, largely, that women are viewed as similar to men but markedly the "other" with their differing anatomical structure.⁷¹ The monstrous appears in other cyberfeminist work, such as *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* by Linda Dement.⁷² For Dement's work, women scanned their bodies at the Adelaide Festival of Art, and these scans were used and put together for Dement's video game [Figure 15].⁷³ Similarly, the viewer is prompted to click through Dement's video game, and it leans into horror and violence

⁷⁰ Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 67.

⁷¹ Ibid, 65.

⁷² Mindy Seu, *Cyberfeminism*, 63.

⁷³ Linda Dement, *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*, 1995, accessed May 6, 2025, <https://www.lindadement.com/cyberflesh-girlmonster.htm>.

as a way of comedically commentating on femininity.⁷⁴ This is particularly interesting when one considers how horror is typically seen in relation to women. Like Braidotti argues, women are commonly associated with the horrific or monstrous. Furthermore, in her article, Williams points out that scholars view horror films as trying to work out the “originary problem of sexual difference”, that is, what makes men and women different.⁷⁵ Traditionally in media studies, scholars have claimed that horror is sourced from the psychoanalytical castration fantasy, which is in turn sourced from sadomasochist perversions.⁷⁶ Essentially, these scholars argue that media centered on horror, who’s presumed audience are adolescent men, often feature gruesome death scenes that hinge on something happening unexpectedly within the narrative, typically the shocking death of a woman in the video game, film, or other form of media.⁷⁷ However, scholars such as Williams argue that horror, typically seen as an excessive genre, the common sense approach of reducing them to perverted or male-gaze driven drivel may be reductive.⁷⁸ Rather, women may find pleasure or empowerment in horror, a genre where viewer identification often shifts from a feminine horror to an actively empowered woman.⁷⁹ I argue that a net.art project like *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* is emblematic of this: through common sense alone, one could argue that the project is misogynistic with its portrayal of women as literal floating limbs. However, Dement leans into the excess of horror and creates a tongue-in-cheek feminist video game, one where the player gets the autonomy to interact with the grotesque images Dement is presenting. This creates a sense of humor as the viewer engages with this monstrous feminine.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Williams, “Excess,” 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 9.

⁷⁷ Williams, “Excess,” 9.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 7.

Stermitz's excess comes not purely from horror, but rather from comedy too. She too leans into the horrific, or the monstrous, as both an ironic gesture but also an empowering or protective gesture. With four sprawling legs and an almost indiscernible visual language, the viewer is left confused and even unnerved by the duplicated legs. Rather than the objectified, sexualized original image being fronted, the avatar is simultaneously unnerving and silly. The negative space adds to this unnerving collage. As Stermitz states, she created these avatars out of both the image and text submitted to her. The text submitted along with this avatar is, "My body? Me but always different!" The comical delivery of how the woman views her body informs Stermitz's humorous and ironic treatment of the avatar. Her body, her but "always different", is a mutating object – her body is ever-changing. Thus, an excess of legs, along with an excess of visual humor, leads the avatar to the thought-provoking avatar rather than the original image of sexual pleasure.

Avatars and Beyond

In Stermitz's project, avatars such as *Four Legged Woman* [Figure 5] facilitate interaction between two different users: the person submitting their avatar and the website viewer. This is critical to acknowledge, especially in conjunction with arguments relating to the male gaze and body genres, both of which were originally thought of in relation to film. The user viewing the net.art project clicks through pink orbs that dot the page to explore the site, a far cry from media like film or television in which the viewer is passive. However, the interactive aspect of the net.art project also serves as a form of voyeurism or spectacle similar to how scholars describe film and the male gaze. The viewer must click through a digital gallery of avatars, peeling back layers of code and looking into the identities of the participants that submitted.

Avatars like *Blue Woman* [Figure 1] serve as a spectacle of identity, by being a somewhat ridiculous image, while still implicating serious discussions about the body. Therefore, I would argue that this idea of excess, or excessive visual humor, and the viewer's relationship to the media are applicable to Stermitz's net.art project.

While these avatars, which the viewer looks at throughout the project, are created by Stermitz, they still stand in as representations of the participant's identity. As Liao finds in interviews with people creating avatars in Second Life, a video game in which people communicate through avatars, the individuals who create avatars often view their avatars as a summation of their identity.⁸⁰ Stermitz is working with the avatar in a similar way. As she states, the text and image informed the creation of the avatar, and she did not view herself as doing much interpretive creation, "I only did the artistic part of creating the digital collage for the single image that became the representative avatar later. It was just an artistic process with input images and text, and the final avatar as outcome."⁸¹ All the pieces necessary for constructing the avatar, in her view, were provided to her through both the images and the text response.

In constructing these avatars, Stermitz has stressed that one of the cruxes of the *World of Female Avatars* is leaving the "meatspace", and, as Stermitz puts it, "to enter the cyber space means to leave the 'meat space' behind, to enter the transcendental place of 'mind over matter.'"⁸² Meat space is a common term in cyberfeminist discourse which refers to the physical world in contrast to cyberspace, or the digital world.⁸³ Stermitz and other cyberfeminist artists believe that leaving the physical meat space, and the physical body specifically, could be

⁸⁰ Liao, "Art Medium Too", 6.

⁸¹ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 6, 2025.

⁸² Stermitz, "World," 539.

⁸³ Merriam-Webster, "What Is Meatspace?," *Merriam-Webster.com*, last modified April 26, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/what-is-meatspace>.

liberating to women. Furthermore, Stermitz herself has pointed out that “weirdly, cyberfeminism deals with preformed bodies, re-creating concepts of femininity and subjectivity.”⁸⁴ In Stermitz’s project, the body is completely tossed aside. Femininity is restructured, but the physical body itself is not largely present in the project, rather, representations of it are. In doing so, the attention of the viewer is taken away from the semantics of the physical body, and can rather focus on what the participants *want* to be seen as, their avatars.

Stermitz’s assemblages tie into Liao’s scholarship on the avatar in ways that are prescient when viewing the *World of Female Avatars* as a work of net.art. As Liao points out, assembling an avatar is an art-making process directly related to assemblage, one based on Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas of assemblage.⁸⁵

“An abstract line is a line with no outlines, a line that passes between things, a line in mutation.... It is very much alive, living and creative.... An assemblage is carried along by its abstract lines, when it is able to have or trace abstract lines”⁸⁶

As Liao says in reference to Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage is a “space where creative new possibilities can be fulfilled.”⁸⁷ Assemblage is not only the technical process in which artists like Stermitz create their work, but also a complex multitude of ideas, as the artist must consider how their assemblage reflects the assembled parts appropriately. This consideration is even more important when working with the avatar, as these digital representations are often based on the identity of the original user (or in Stermitz’s case, submitter).⁸⁸ Thus, *assemblage* is the mode in which Stermitz is creating her work, but the final product is also an assemblage. The mode and the result are equally weighted in this form of internet art.

⁸⁴ Stermitz, “World,” 538.

⁸⁵ Liao, “Art Medium Too”, 2.

⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 178.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸⁸ Liao, “Art Medium Too”, 5.

This dual notion of assemblage can be seen in the third set of images provided to Stermitz [Figure 16] and the resulting avatar, *Watching Woman* [Figure 6]. There are two original images that the individual submitted. The left image depicts a woman with her hand pressed against her face. Her shirt is off, but the viewer cannot see anything below her shoulders. She has short, blonde hair, and her face takes up most of the frame. She looks displeased, and her gaze meets the viewer sharply. Behind her, the frame is completely black, and the viewer is unable to make out anything beyond where she is. The right image appears to be the same woman, except this time she is sleeping in a bed. She lies across the bed horizontally, on her back, with her right arm draped across her chest and her left arm falling down to a blanket draped across her. Her head sinks comfortably into a white pillow, its folds creasing around where she makes contact. To her left, an object, perhaps a book, is next to her as she sleeps. The accompanying text the submitter provided is as follows:

“It is not possible to insist any more on a dualism of body and mind. The body speaks by itself and tells us more than we are ready to understand. Bodies are constructs in the way we deal with them and have their histories. These histories are interventions with, on and through bodies. If I am interested in the body is when the body thinks and speaks by itself.”⁸⁹

The woman submitting this seems to be arguing that the body should speak for itself, rather than having the body always associated with the mind, or theories of the body. The avatar that Stermitz crafted has combined both images together. The face of the woman in the left image provided has been cropped out, flipped, and blown up. Her large, floating head stares down at the right image, the woman laying down sleeping. Both figures dwell in empty space with a black void around them. The large-headed woman seems to be surveilling the identical sleeping woman in a sort of dualism similar to how the submitter describes. The body is of note

⁸⁹ From the *World of Female Avatars* website.

here: it is what is being watched, what the focus of the avatar is. There is something ridiculous about a woman's own head watching her sleeping body. Additionally, the surveillance of the sleeping woman calls back to the earlier discussion of the male gaze. While there is a huge pair of eyes watching the woman sleep, they represent *herself*, not the male gaze as Mulvey describes. I would argue that this is, similarly, an *excess* of surveillance, a visual joke. There is a literal giant head watching her own body sleep. This, in turn, relates to the idea of self-surveillance, which suggests that women are often required or expected to survey themselves in ways men are not.⁹⁰ As women's bodies are often viewed as social currency, they are expected to present themselves as the most attractive or appealing, and culturally, it is communicated to women that in doing so, they will gain respect or social clout.⁹¹ Stermitz's avatar depicts a form of surveillance, but the woman surveilled is being surveilled by herself, in a sort of meta-surveillance. Stermitz is able to imbue complications and nuances into these images through the tongue-in-cheek construction of these avatars, adding both new questions but also creating new meaning through her assemblages. In doing so, she avoids reductive or stereotypical depictions of the female body. Rather, she raises questions in her assemblages, resisting an easy or straightforward interpretation. Furthermore, I suggest that this form of excessive surveillance, or ridiculousness, also challenges how women find agency. The image suggests the idea of the gaze, something commonly flattened into being bad for women, but as discussed, scholars like Williams suggest that excessive genres (or genres that tend to be dominated by the male gaze) could be seen as empowering.⁹² Thus, the visual joke on surveillance combined with this idea of excess serves as an empowering or even fun avatar for the woman who submitted.

⁹⁰ R.M. Calogero, "Objectification Theory, Self-Objectification, and Body Image," in *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, ed. Thomas Cash (Academic Press, 2012), 574.

⁹¹ Calogero, "Objectification", 575.

⁹² Williams, "Excess," 10.

All three case studies: *Blue Woman* [Figure 2], *Four Legged Woman* [Figure 5], and *Watching Woman* [Figure 6], help elucidate Stermitz's method in reworking how these women view themselves and their bodies. Her net.art project, populated by these avatars, is in itself an assemblage of art, an assemblage of avatars.⁹³ In an article by Liao, the scholar even points out the avatars Stermitz creates construct "new bodies [which] constitute an assemblage of female identities".⁹⁴ The time period, the early 2000s, is also critical in understanding both the website and how Stermitz reworks these identities. According to Stermitz, net.art was "quite vivid" in the early 2000s, and as mentioned, the project was disseminated through FACES, a mailing list created as women new media artists recognized the need for increased visibility and collaboration between women art creators.⁹⁵ Furthermore, in the early 2000s, the internet was not quite as ubiquitous to daily life than it is now.

"Some of the women from the Faces mailing list submitted and some of my women artist friends, so I knew most of the women who submitted, however not very close. Later, when the project was exhibited in public, also some strangers submitted. But this was not the point, since with the submission I only received the anonymous email address to notify [them] later that the "Avatar is living in the *World of Female Avatars* now""⁹⁶

As Stermitz explains, she knew most of the women engaging with her project, and did not know only a few people who submitted. However, regardless if she knew them or not, she did not provide them with the finished avatar. Rather, she sent them an email alerting them their avatar is now in the digital world. Then, these individuals would have to open the net.art project and click through each individual orb, waiting until they saw an avatar that resembled their provided images, thus locating their avatar. This is, of course, extremely different from other

⁹³ Liao, "Art Medium Too", 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ "Sample Page," FACES-L: Framing Academic Collaborations on Earth Systems, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.faces-l.net/index.php/sample-page/>.

⁹⁶ From an interview done with Evelin Stermitz, April 6, 2025.

typical modes of engaging with artwork, such as going to a museum or gallery. However, rather than this being a drawback of the work, it is intended. Like many other net.art projects, Stermitz engages in anti-establishment or culturally critical ideas.⁹⁷ Since net.art projects are often not as driven by the need for capital as traditional gallery spaces, they can afford to be more avant-garde or countercultural.⁹⁸ Furthermore, they (like much contemporary art) often engage in political debate or philosophical ideas.⁹⁹ While the aesthetic of the website and how Stermitz crafts the website itself are crucial, the ideas and philosophies she is engages in are just as important.¹⁰⁰ As Stermitz states, she is particularly interested in Adorno and Horkheimer's engagement of the culture industry and the culture of the body.¹⁰¹ As outlined, Stermitz is reworking the intrinsic enculturation that many women experience due to the misogynistic culture industry through an excess of irony or humor. The avatars shown all hinge on some visual gag or turning the original image up, so to speak. *Blue Woman* [Figure 2] goes from a teenage girl to an angelic deity, *Four Legged Woman* [Figure 5] is a visual pun on the fetishism relating to legs, and *Watching Woman* [Figure 6] is a tongue-in-cheek joke on the idea of surveillance and self-surveillance. The leveraging of visual excess allows Stermitz to rewrite how these women view themselves through their avatars.

Through her assemblages, Stermitz reconfigures how these women's ideas of themselves are represented and expressed through the internet. By leveraging the internet as a space of possibility (and drawing on past net.art projects that have done similarly), Stermitz introduced the avatar to net.art to push what is possible online, bypassing strictly analog means. Though her

⁹⁷ Julian Stallabrass, "The Aesthetics of Net.Art," *Qui Parle* 14, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2003): 54.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry".

original analog concept pivoted online out of necessity, she used the internet to create a net.art project that pulled from cyberfeminism to inform her art-making strategies. In doing so, her net.art project also resists dominant cultural ideologies, stemming from Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry, and reframes womanhood in empowered ways. Though Williams' original article applies to film, through extending the commonalities of spectacle and viewership to Stermitz's article, it is possible to see how Stermitz constructs novel identities through the use of humor and irony. Finally, with the creation of avatars, Stermitz is able to intervene and recodify how these women view themselves and, as the original prompt asked, their bodies. Thus, she challenges enculturated beliefs that these women have likely developed about themselves.

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Appendix

Here are the two interviews I conducted with Evelin Stermitz over email.

Interview 1

April 6, 2025

Zach Trabitz: Do you know if the photographs submitted to the *World of Female Avatars* were self-images? As in, were women submitting photographs of themselves? Or was it more they would find these images, submit them as representations of themselves, and you would edit them.

Evelin Stermitz: I would say that most of the submitted digital images as JPG are images of the women themselves since the outgoing question was “What do you think about your body?”. And then there was the option to submit images and a text about their body. So, it was a personally related question in general. But the question was not explicit about body images. Some submissions contained in addition images of personal metaphoric images. As I know some of the women who submitted, I can confirm that most of the images were personal images of them. Also, a few women submitted art pieces from their feminist art projects that deal with the connection of women and the body.

ZT: In the Powers of Projection: Contemporary Art & Cybernetics talk, you outlined how the women submitting images to your online project would send you images and you would assemble/collage them. I am curious: how did you view this exchange? For example, I viewed it as a really intimate exchange, so I was wondering how you viewed it.

ES: I did not see it as an intimate exchange, because there was no nudity in the images,

and, also, women artists are usually dealing with image representation of a woman's body in general. So, for me it was a pure artistic method of creating an artistic collage with images that were incoming like *Objet trouvés* – images that I found and used for my project. I just found this method interesting and was curious what to create out of mostly one to three images that I have received, and, of course in accordance with the short text that has been also submitted.

ZT: How did people initially view the *World of Female Avatars*? For example, was it circulated widely (by who, if so) or did people randomly find it when using the internet? Did people post it on forums online?

ES: At that time, 2005 – 2006, net art was quite vivid, and I posted the open call for the project to the feminist mailing list “Faces”. Through this mailing list, the project has been spread, and I have received the incoming material to create the avatars. Later, I submitted it to exhibitions, and so the project has been circulated.

ZT: Did you know most of the individuals submitting? Or did you not? Did strangers end up submitting to the project?

ES: Some of the women from the Faces mailing list submitted and some of my women artist friends, so I knew most of the women who submitted, however not very close.

Later, when the project was exhibited in public, also some strangers submitted. But this was not the point, since with the submission I only received the anonymous email address to notify later that the “Avatar is living in the *World of Female Avatars* now”. All avatars have no name, so it could be anybody. Important is only the avatar living in virtual space.

ZT: How did you navigate the considerations of representing these other women's

identities through avatars?

ES: The representation of women's identities through avatars was given by the submitter, through their images and text, so it was already there. I only did the artistic part of creating the digital collage for the single image that became the representative avatar later. It was just an artistic process with input images and text, and the final avatar as outcome.

ZT: Why did you land on the idea of the 'avatar'?

ES: At that time, it was quite popular to have an avatar of oneself on the Internet. But actually, what an avatar is – is just an image circulating in digital space. The advantage is, that it can be created individually, and it can have nothing to do with the real person.

ZT: How do you plan on preserving or archiving the exhibition?

ES: “World of Female Avatars” is not an exhibition, but a net art project. The project was built with using Flash, that is already out of use nowadays. But there is a plugin to see it also nowadays. The project underlies the technological changes that we face every day. I am still preserving the project digitally and use screenshots for preservation.

ZT: In what ways do you think digital exhibitions like yours offer a different experience from physical ones in terms of audience engagement and interpretation?

ES: “World of Female Avatars” is not an exhibition, but a net art project. But there are curated online exhibitions and biennials existing for net art projects, which makes sense. Through this way of representation, it is possible to view the work online and not installed in a physical gallery space. The digital art piece remains in the digital realm. Nevertheless, both ways of representations – online and physical – are important for net art projects, just the interaction with the artwork can be different for the viewer. But I

would say, all audience engagements and interpretations are individual.

ZT: What theorists besides the ones you list on the website informed your project?

ES: Cyberfeminist theorists, feminist literature and feminist art literature.

Interview 2

April 27, 2025

Zach Trabitz: Did you view your project as part of the net.art movement? If so, are there any works in particular that you see it as analogous to?

Evelin Stermitz: ‘World of Female Avatars’ is a net art project and was intended to be constructed within the cyberfeminist net art movement, since I was involved also in other net art projects at that time. The involvement of participants made ‘World of Female Avatars’ to a source of diverse avatar statements. I do not compare my project to other net art pieces, but there is a project that also uses dots in the interface display and where I have been participating as an artist – ‘D/t\p disturb.the.peace [angry women]’ by Jess Loseby, that was also created at that time. It was not intended to have a similar interface and the usage of moving dots was somehow a coincidence that I saw later. (<http://www.d-t-p.tv>, <http://www.d-t-p.tv/artists.htm>)

ZT: Where were the people submitting to the project located geographically? Was it international, or were more people located in a certain part of the world?

ES: The participants are located all over the world, but I received entries primarily from Europe and the USA.

ZT: Did you get responses in languages that you then had to translate to English?

ES: All the entries for the project have been submitted in English.

ZT: Finally, did you title your avatars?

ES: No, I do not have titles or names for each avatar since the project is anonymous.

Figures



Figure 1. Images provided to Evelin Stermitz for the *World of Female Avatars*. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Evelin Stermitz, *Blue Woman*, 2006. Internet art, digitally edited in Photoshop. The *World of Female Avatars*. Courtesy of the artist.

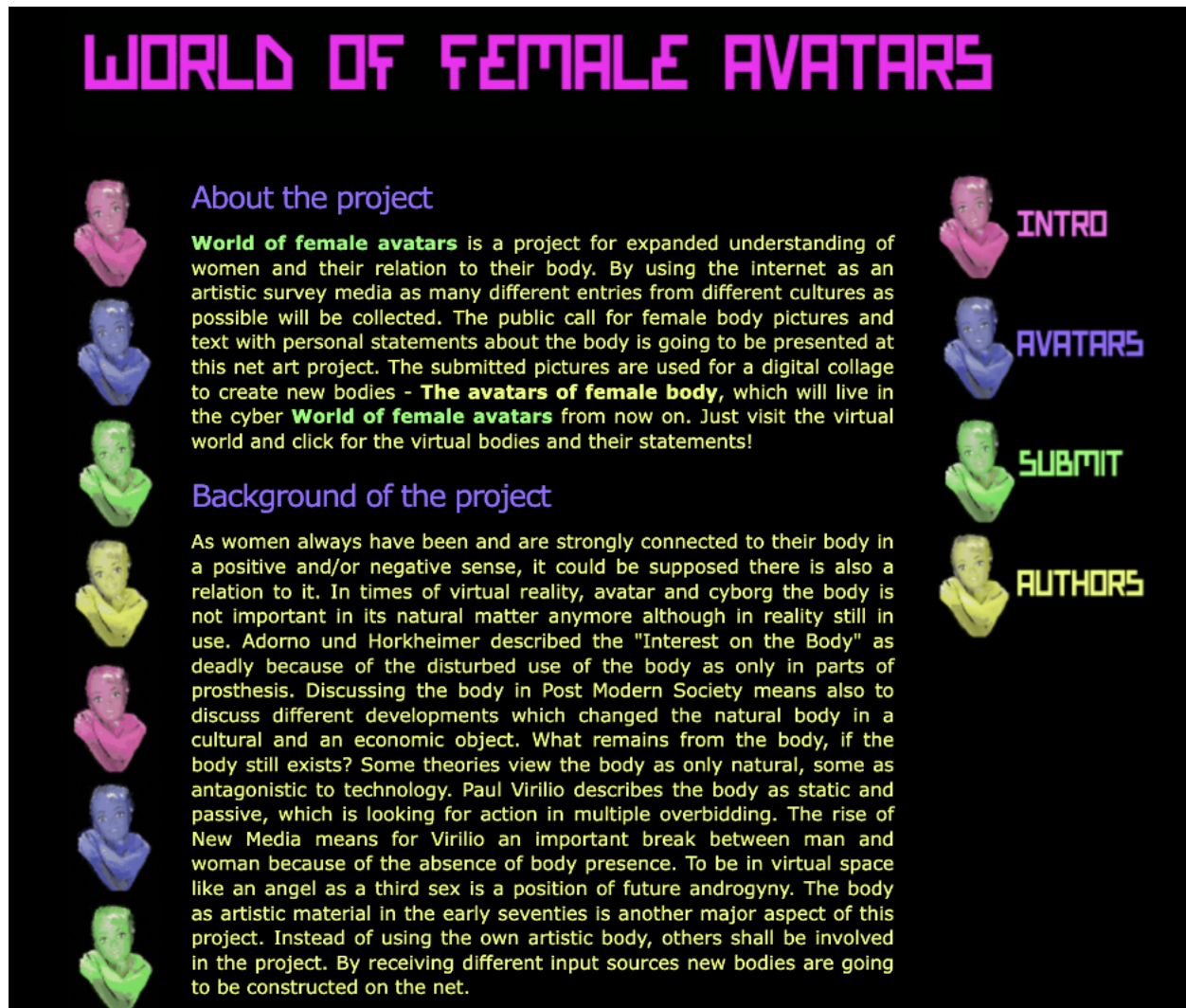


Figure 3. The "Introduction" page of the *World of Female Avatars*, 2025. Screenshot from <https://world-of-female-avatars.net/main.html>

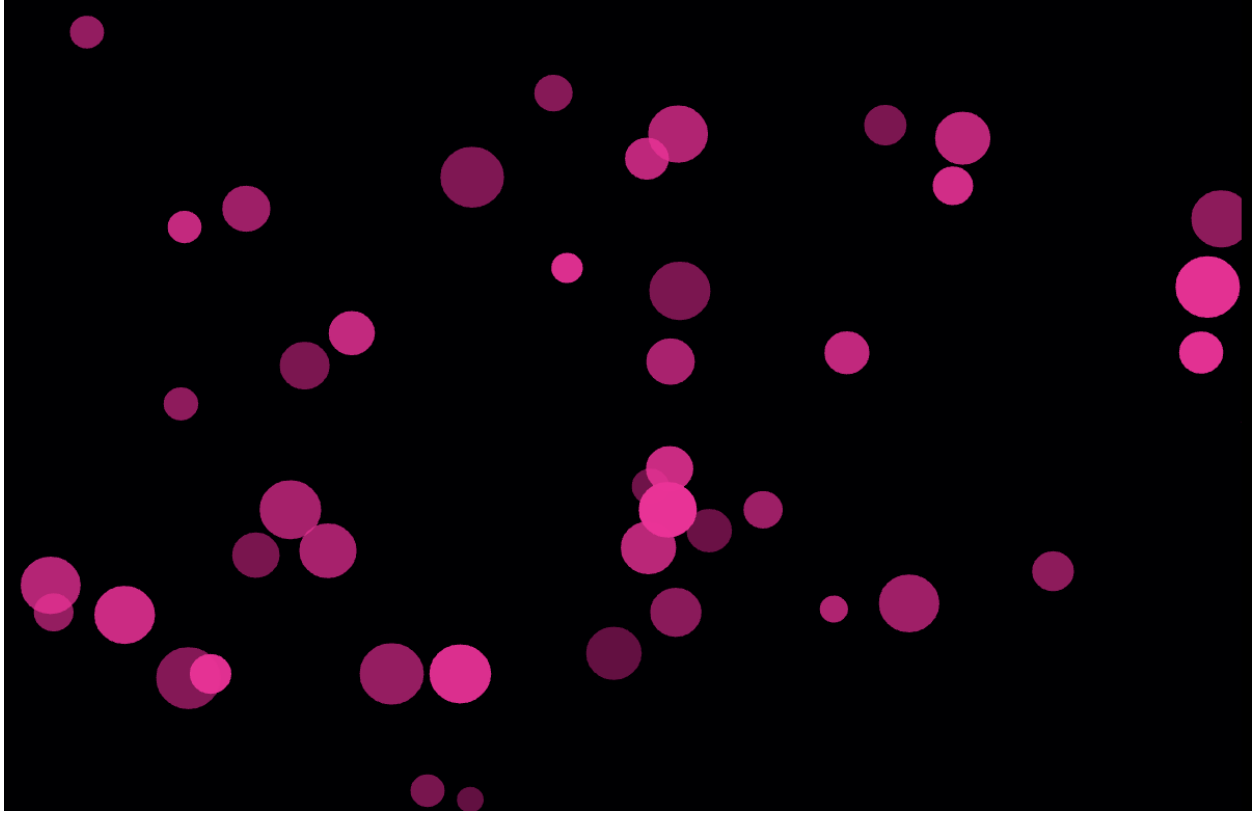


Figure 4. The “Avatars” page of the *World of Female Avatars*, 2025. Screenshot from <https://world-of-female-avatars.net/avatars.html>

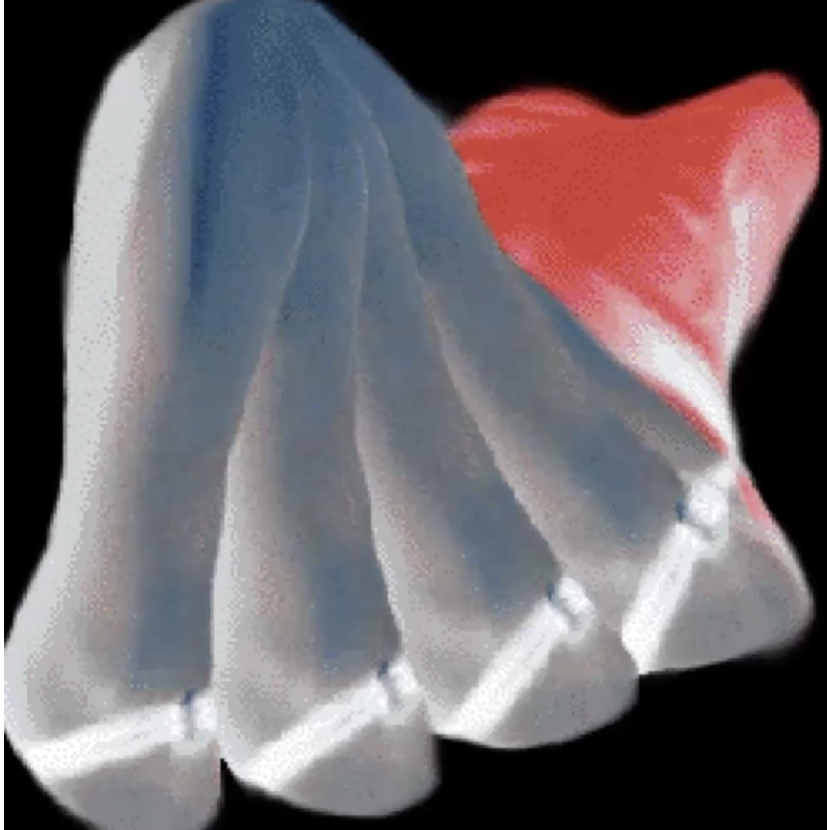


Figure 5. Evelin Stermitz, *Four Legged Woman*, 2006. Internet art, digitally edited in Photoshop. *The World of Female Avatars*. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Evelin Stermitz, *Watching Woman*, 2006. Internet art, digitally edited in Photoshop. *The World of Female Avatars*. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Images provided to Evelin Stermitz for the *World of Female Avatars*. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Antonio Muntadas, *The File Room*, 1994. Internet-based installation.

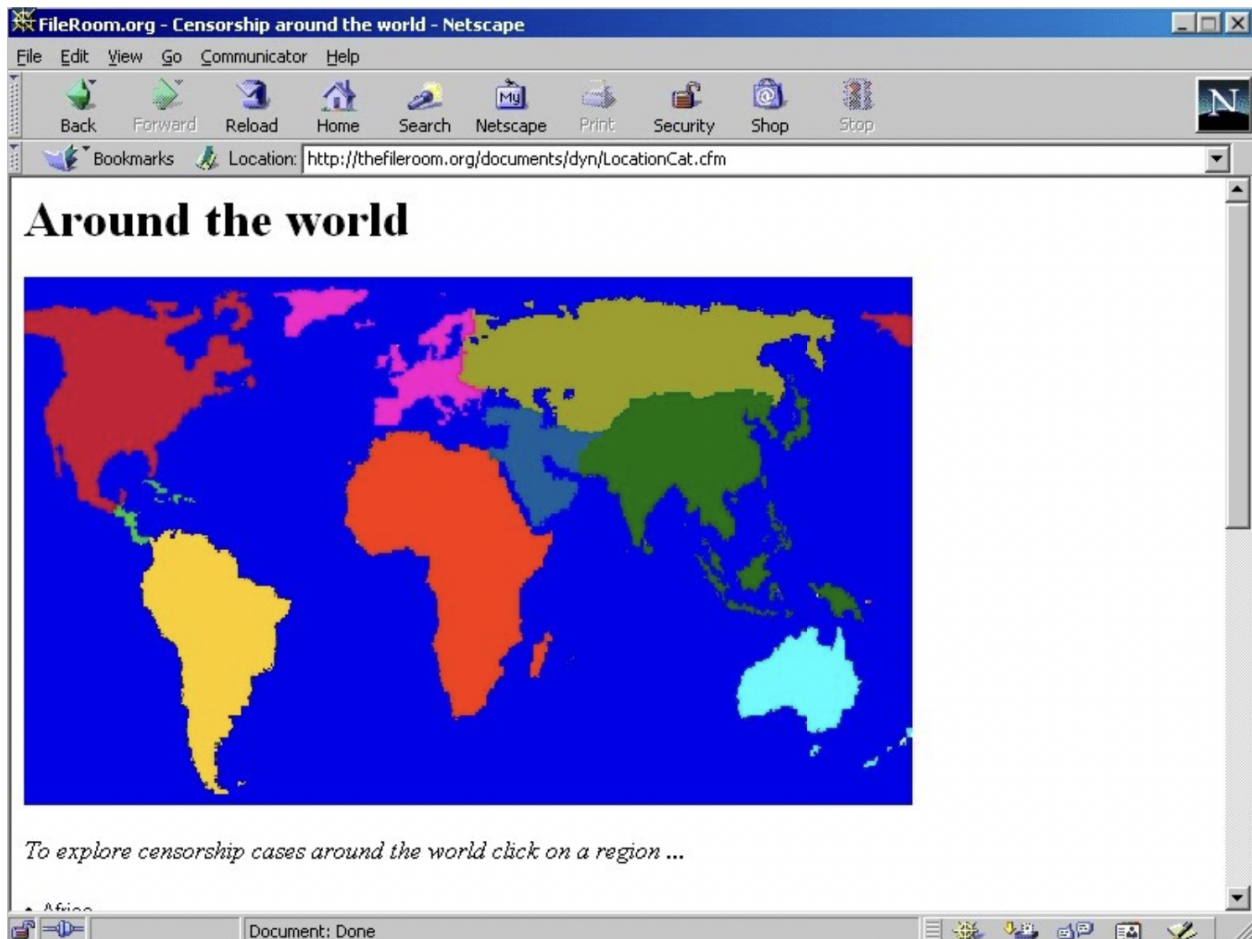


Figure 9. Antoni Muntadas, *The File Room*, 1994. Screenshot from Google Arts & Culture.

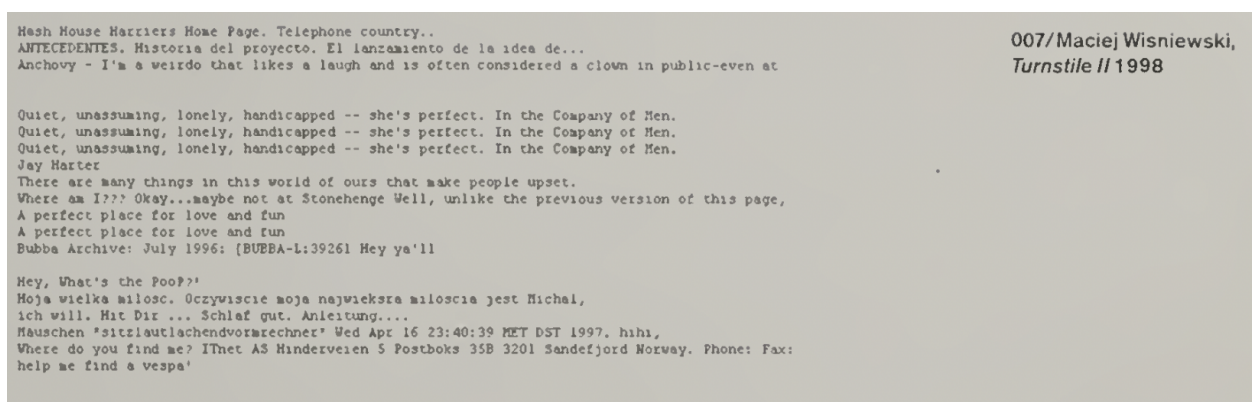


Figure 10. Maciej Wisniewski, *Turnstile II*, 1998. Net art project.



Figure 11. VNS Matrix, *DNA Sluts battle Circuit Boy*, *All New Gen*, 1992. Digital image on CD-ROM.

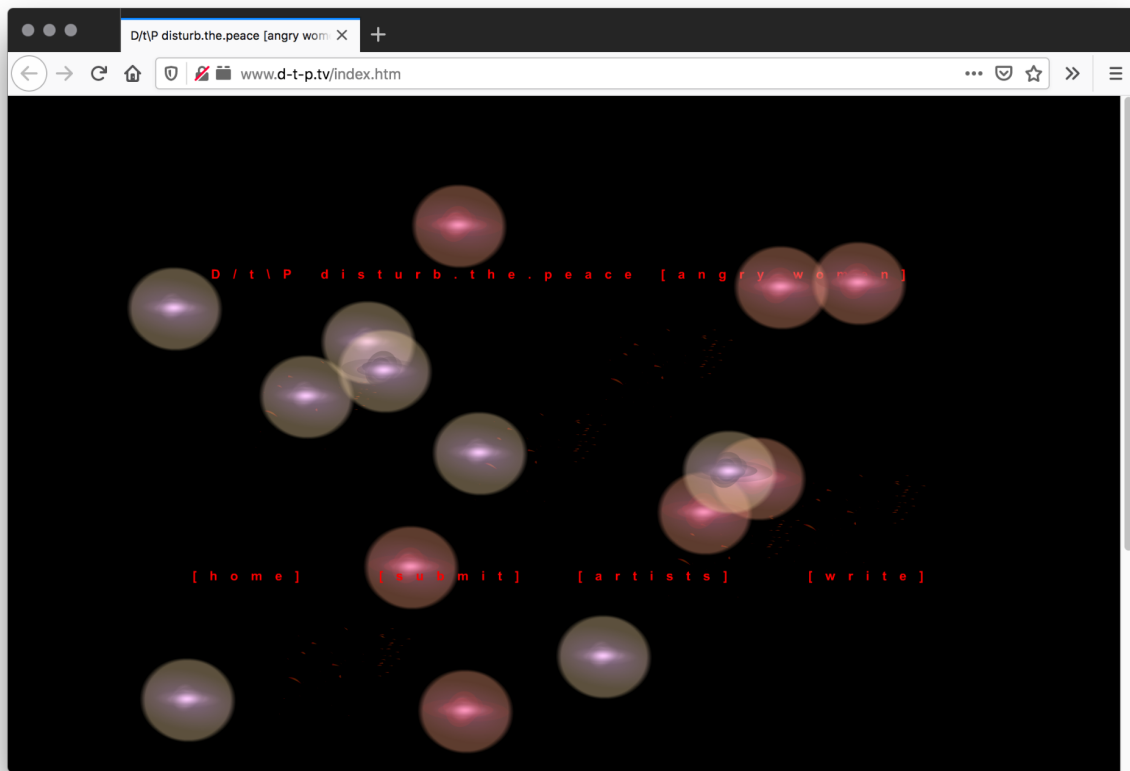


Figure 12. Screenshot of *D/t/P disturb.the.peace [angry women]*, 2005. <https://www.d-t-p.tv/>



Figure 13. Evelin Stermitz, *IDONTWANTTOBEA*, from *D/t\P disturb.the.peace [angry women]*, 2005. <https://www.d-t-p.tv/work/evelin.htm>



Figure 14. Evelin Stermitz, *IDONTWANTTOBEA*, from *D/t/P disturb.the.peace [angry women]*, 2005. <https://www.d-t-p.tv/work/evelin.htm>



Figure 15. Screenshot from Linda Dement's *Cyberfeminist Girlmonster*, 1995.
<http://www.lindadement.com/cyberflesh-girlmonster.htm>



Figure 16. Images provided to Evelin Stermitz for the *World of Female Avatars*. Courtesy of the artist.