Transscript

Forms of Ongoingness.

Interview with Femke Snelting and spideralex by Cornelia Sollfrank

http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/forms-of-ongoingness/

16 September 2018, House for Electronic Arts (HeK), Basel.

FS:	00:24	My name is Femke Snelting, and I work with and for *Constant*, an association for arts and media based in Brussels. This collective, or rather collective of collectives, is running since 1997. So, it has a long history of, I would say, feminist work on technology. We sometimes say that we work on the intersection of thinking through authorship, working with and on free software and feminism. And so, where these things come together, that's where our activities happen. We are an arts organization, I'd say; although we work with many different people, our basis is in art and culture. And then regarding my work, my background is in design. I've always had an interest in publishing and the relation between tools and practices in design and publishing. So, one of the many things that *Constant* does is working on publications with a whole range of designers, authors, and technologists to think about how one can make publications that somehow make an account of how they are made. So, the conditions of making, not just in the sense of finances, but also in the sense of tools, fonts, aesthetic choices… So that's one of the things I'm working on.
sp:	01:58	My name is spideralex. I'm part of a collective that we founded in 2006 with some friends that is called *Donestech* [https://*donestech*.net/], and we have been researching about the relations between gender and technologies, and we are focused on the inclusion of women, non-binary persons and LGBTIQ in practices that are with free software and free technologies. We do different things, such as action research, training and also audio-visual production. I have also been working for the last years on the issue of how women, human rights defenders and women activists can protect the privacy and digital security from a holistic perspective and how they can transfer this knowledge to their own

networks and communities. So, I think I'm working at the intersection of free technologies, infrastructure, training and facilitation processes... That's it basically.

SHARED PRACTICES

FS: 03:00   I think, for me, what brings us together at different moments and for a while already – and not just us, but our networks, I think it's important to say that it's not just a personal relation, but it's also a relation of the networks and collectives were involved in – is this [question of], do we need this work on feminist technology, and trying to figure out, what that is, and how it can be done: to invent practices, to work on methods, to do research on what feminist technologies can be, but also how it can be done. And, I think that's, why we meet each other quite often.

sp: 03:57   Yes, I think that is for the last years, because I think that our first encounter was in this love for free software and free technologies and opening the process, because both of our collectives and the networks we are related, are very interested in participative action research. So, this is something that is distributed and the affiliation of competencies and mutual support, in pushing forward certain processes, certain events, so people can meet. Sometimes, it's also about under the radar practices and people can feel for a time alone. And it's very important to create those possibilities of meeting, in time and space, temporarily. So, I think in that, for us, it's been always a reference and an inspiration, the work of *Constant*. When we started in Catalonia, there were not so many collectives that we're working along those lines. And then, because we had the chance to gather and meet, because it's important to meet face-to-face and have this intimacy, so we could build trust, and yeah, that's I think what has driven us to interact every time more on the issue of what are feminist technologies and feminist infrastructures.

COMMON CONCERNS

sp: 05:14   Maybe I need to make a little bit of rewind. First, cyberfeminism, when it came along with the emergence of cyberspace, it was like this possibility of a new territory, where nobody knew you were a "dog" or a woman or LGBT person or whatever. And there was this possibility to create new identities, and new gender, and hack a lot of heteronormativity and patriarchy and also capitalism... So, in some way, the evolution of the Internet, as it has gone through a lot of processes, very quickly, it has become a very centralized space, very commercial and very surveilled. So, now we are in a different situation, where everybody is tracked,

monitored, measured, quantified, and everybody knows who you are, when you are conveying your ideas, and your work, and your voice and so on.

sp: 06:09   Since 2000, we have been always working supporting alternative technologies and infrastructures, for these events and social movements, and activists. But, very quickly, I saw that there was like a specificity with women, feminists and LGBTIQ, and that they were more prone to be the target of online harassment, discrimination and violence, when they were online. And, of course, that violence that happens through information and communication technologies, they are just mirroring and amplifying violence that happens in real life, related to bigotry, sexism, or racism and so on. So yeah, at that moment, it was awakening, and saying, okay, we need to change our practices, and we need to really develop methodologies that can support not only reactively, like self-defence, – which is important you need to know, how to protect yourself and the networks you are working with – but there was also a need to shift to something that was more proactive. And by proactivity, I mean really envisioning and desiring the technologies that we need for information and communication, and that we can, you know, shape them and maintain them.

FS: 07:23   I think, I mean [there are] many related motivations, but for me, *Constant*, and the people around, I think one of the moments I could see the shift for explicitly starting to work on feminist technologies – whatever that is then – came through a realization that our radical choice to work with free software and take the consequences of that, and our, really uh, conviction that the free software manifesto was a feminist manifesto. Because, if you read it, you can really see, how it connects to feminist values. So, we were performing and acting those, the feminist potential of free software, and then seeing how there's many more things going on that actually keep back that [feminist] potential, and that we needed to be much more direct, explicit and clear about our feminist intentions. So that it helps as a sort of framework to understand, and the usefulness of feminist theory and thinking and activism for rethinking technologies into a direction that we want. And, so it's really like to bring together the potential of free software, but not to believe that it ends there, and to engage the thinking power of feminists – for dealing with this complex world.

sp: 09:09   In 2007, we interviewed Laurence Rassel, who was part of *Constant,* and we asked her, why is free software feminist, and she told us a very simple thing: she said, operating system in French is "système d'exploitation" (exploitation system). And she said, as a feminist, what you want is to access your exploitation system, and to be able to change and modify it. That is the relation between free software and feminism. And for us, it was very enlightening, but it's true that at one stage, you know, our uses and practices with technologies, they are not just in our computer or smartphone. There is something that relates not with the front end, but with the backend. So, that's where it was suddenly went, okay, maybe we can control and make some modification on the devices we have in our hands, but what happens with the channels and the infrastructure that is below, or that is related, because a lot of problems happen there...

sp: 10:01   ... a lot of binary, capitalist, patriarchal code is operating there. So, at one moment is this idea that infrastructure is what is below the surface, something that you cannot really see or sense or touch. But you know that is what is sustaining your capacity to inform and communicate about what you're doing and why you're doing it, and so on, which is very important to push the feminist struggles and agenda. So, at one moment, I began to have this understanding that feminist technologies are incomplete if you don't do all the layers. No?

FS: 10:44   Yeah. I think, it's really taking serious the consequences of thinking about technology as being embedded in practices of maintenance, of care, of resources, of shorter and longer time frames – which is a kind of thinking that is very much in feminist theory –, but then if you try to think technology like that, technology has to change, practices around it have to change, with really – as you say – going through all the layers, and think about them; how they produce norms, how they make space for difference, how they work from possibilities and not probabilities, how you keep opening up the potential...

sp: 11:39   And if I may, it is this understanding that when – and here I'm talking specifically about digital and electronic information and communication technologies; they have costs. And they have costs for many other people and generally the most affected are women, or migrants, or kids and so on. So, [it starts] from where we extract the minerals, to where the devices are assembled, to how we are enabling some people to accept or not to accept all those dimensions, even how people can contribute to the governance systems... And then there are a lot of gaps where, you know,

women, LGBTIQ communities, and other discriminated cultural communities are not present in the same way. So, in that sense, it's like the two dimensions, how we can create new spaces to include those voices and those practices in all those layers. So, we can push a real solidarity, a feminist solidarity, across frontiers, about what our uses and practices with technologies convey for the planet, for the people that are affected by the beginning of the production of technologies, and the end, where the waste is going. So, as a feminist, you cannot just use information, communication and technologies without thinking about those dimensions. And how you can mitigate, and how you can overcome them by creating more fair and feminist technologies.

FEMINIST SERVER

FS: 13:08   First of all, what is a server? I think that's important. So, a server is a computer, but a computer connected to the Internet, with the task to route processes and services. So, there's this deep relation between service and server. It's a relatively old technology that is at the base of how we have come to use the Internet. So, the Internet you could describe in a very rough way, as a lot of servers being interconnected. Because those are the nodes in the network, those are the storage places and the sort of the generators of the traffic, it's important to think about them as places. And so, if we say feminist servers, it's those places, but then thought from those many layers, resources, maintenance, care, relations between serving and served, skills, access, security, all these kinds of things come into play, when we say 'feminist server.'

sp: 14:27   I totally agree with Femke. I think we need to physicalize and visualize servers as a crucial space, once we were saying, we need a room of our own, now we need a 'connected room' of our own – that is also a book by Remedios Zafra, a cyberfeminist from Spain that was theorizing and thinking about those dimensions. So, of course, the server is the place where your data is going to be hosted, the contents of your websites, online services you ask for, and then the server serves it to you. But we don't want to be served, we don't want to be always using a provider of a service. I think a feminist server is also a space that we want to inhabit, as inhabitants, where we make a contribution, nurturing a safe space and a place for creativity and experimentation, a place for hacking heteronormativity and patriarchy. I think, some servers are more anti-capitalist, others are less anti-capitalist; that's a dimension and a debate that we need to keep discussing. But yeah, feminist servers, I think they relate to this possibility to learn together, how to maintain the space together, but in a non-hierarchical way, and in a non-meritocratic way.

And that's very difficult, because generally, the knowledge process related to servers has been based on this idea of meritocracy, no?

FS: 15:58   I mean, what's interesting about the feminist server is that it's both a real practice and a need, so for actual spaces that can provide storage and services, but while being that, it's also a very powerful thinking tool, to discuss and bring out the problems that are with the technologies of today. This question of the relation, of the dependency, of the expectation of 24-hours availability, all of that comes out, in what servers do, and somehow the force field around them. So, I think, between us, we've been working on actual servers that we tried to make feminist, and doing the thinking work of what that could be –with the help of this object, that sometimes is actually in the room and sometimes it is not. But it's interesting that, even when it's not in the room, the feminist server is very useful in our practices.

NON-HIERARCHICAL TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

sp: 17:20   It's a complex question, and it's a question that doesn't only relate to feminist server. I think, it's a question that many autonomous and alternative non-commercial servers have been trying to address. There is this example of *sindominio* that has been a server of social movements, around for 20 years, with the idea that everybody who wanted to get engaged in the administration of the server would have root success. And, of course, there has been a lot of moments, where things crash, or there were mistakes and so, but the project is still going for 20 years. So, it can work, but of course, it needs a lot of communication and a lot of consensus decision-making processes together. It engages in a slow politics pace; you cannot do it quick, you cannot do it in an authoritarian way, you cannot expect that everything is going to work every time you need it, and so on.

sp: 18:11   So there's a tension between providing those contents that are sometimes crucial and vital, because they reflect the reality and the needs of the social movements that are living in these servers, and also the need for de-growth and for accepting that technology is bound to fail, is going to fail. So, we need also to accept this. So, that's the first thing, if you can work from these preliminary statement, it can help for non-hierarchical processes, and then also is this balance between the do-it-yourself processes that are very important for gaining autonomy and freedom in your relation with the technologies you're using, but going to these do-it-together and do-it-with-others, and that's where it can also be complex and challenging and having a lot of conversations, but I think

it's another dimension that is important. So yeah, it's a tension, it's a trade-off; you lose and you win other dimensions and all depends on your context, and what is most important, at that moment, for the people that inhabit the server.

FS: 19:17   I think for the work within *Constant* it's the experiments with the interdependencies that are around a server, like the focus is not so much on hierarchy/non-hierarchy, but on how to live graciously with those interdependencies. And when you say that, that's both let's say effective relations, but also problematic, and terrible connections. So, it means to, I don't know, to make, to somehow work with promiscuity, to make sure that the technical decisions are never only based on efficiency and optimization in the sort of capitalist perspective that things are lossy, meaning that things fall out. They are, there's many stories, so there's always work on images and imaginations around technology. So, a manual will never be just an instruction on how to use, but it will also have stories of where the things have gone or what the fantasies were around it …

FS: 20:47   … a lot of work on language, because we think, especially in digital technology, the languaging is important, because there's a lot of world-making in the type of imagined relations that are set up through the way technology speaks itself. And this creates other types of collaborations, which then can include, in our case unapproachable computer scientists that then start to dance with queer performers that then reimagine an access policy. So, somehow to complicate those processes and not just to make problems, but to really live with, and have pleasure in those jobs.

INFRASTRUCTUES OF ONE'S OWN

FS: 20:55   So, you ask why it's important to build your own infrastructure. For me, I want to make very clear that when I say feminist infrastructure, I'm not talking about own infrastructure. I think, it's a trap to go through 'own' and 'control' when we think feminist infrastructure. For me, it's really important to keep reminding ourselves that technologies are about relations with things we would like to relate to, but also things we don't want to be related to. So, it's about how to make practices that make the best of those situations, and somehow insert ongoingness in those complexities. That's urgent. It's urgent to find, I mean, late Haraway is really wise, when she says, finding forums of ongoingness, I really like this, this sort of persistence that is not going towards a solution, but is determined and strengthening, and maybe even empowering without cutting itself away from the dependencies it's entangled with. So, this is

urgent, we know it, and I think feminists have certain tools that others
don't that they can use to practice this and to think this.

sp: 23:28   If I can add something to these questions: I think that when we talk
about feminist infrastructure, not just focusing on feminist servers,
which is just an example, because a feminist infrastructure is composed.
When we were looking at commoning: there's content, there's people and
there are processes, and in that sense, I could give examples of other
feministic infrastructure that we all know, like bicycle repair workshops.
They are feminist infrastrucutre, if they are run by feminists; or radio
making, communitarian radio broadcast also, and cooperatives of self-
employment made by feminists; it's also a feminist infrastructure, and
then, I don't know, like feminist safe space, feminist hacker space,
temporary events to meet and learn together. I don't know, self-managed
gynaecology, like the project of GynePunk, is also feminist infrastructure,
and all the relation together is what works together, because alone, it
doesn't really make sense.

sp: 24:38   What makes sense is the ecosystem, because it gives options to people,
because we are all in different situations with regards to our well-being,
the violence we are facing, our options, how we can shift the power
relations we are inside, for us, for our communities and so on. So, what
we are trying to do also with these feminist infrastructures is to create …
diversity. On the Internet right now, there's very little techno-diversity.
Everything is centralized in an oligopoly, and what we need is diversity,
we need techno-diversity. So, feminist server is just one of the processes
and one of the sets of practices that are trained to create this diversity.
Maybe, it's another solution, but it's more options and more options is
good for … for feminism.

ONGOINGNESS VS. AUTONOMY

sp: 25:39   What I'm talking about here is a little bit of conversation we had last
year, when we had a meeting with a lot of people that are engaged
around the world in feminist servers, initiatives and feminist
infrastructure. So, we were thinking that feminist infrastructure was a
set of practices that were based on self-organization, and they were
looking towards autonomy as a desire for freedom, for mutual aid and
solidarity, self-valorization and inclusion. So, it's really not about
autarchy, it's really not about creating the means to cover all your needs.
We are talking about the federation of competencies, and a federation of
desires and a federation of possibilities among ourselves. So, I think, it
was interesting when we met, because we were not trying to say, ok, with

our server we are trying to set up this or that types of services. And it was really nice, because in an informal way, we tried to not replicate. It was like, okay, if you take care of this, we can just focus on that. And that was really nice, because from this connection, these networks of solidarity, we were envisioning autonomy, but autonomy for all of us. I don't know, if I really answered, but for me, autonomy is not autarchy, it is interconnection.

FS: 26:58   It's interesting, because I mean from your practice and from the collectives around and from the answers to the question, what would be feminist infrastructure, it's very clear that it's not at all isolationist. I think for *Constant* in this working on language, it is one of the things at stake, to try to find vocabularies that, especially in technology, that so much is about control and separation and segmentation, to try to speak about it through – there's many, I'd say more or less popular ways of saying that – I said dependency, entanglement, relation, ongoingness ... So, that's one. The other parts, and it came up in the meeting in the last days, is then how do you not slip into the endlessness, the universal everything, which is the other problem, where – because of everything being connected to everything – there is no way, no space to move, no moment to stop.

FS: 28:23   And so, this is work on – like Karen Barad would say – agential cut or ways of being responsible with the decisions to end, which I think is important both on the level of personal work, like how do you, as an individual somehow manage your capacities and what you have to give in relation to others, but also in how the futures we imagine have consequences on the long term, will go beyond us, have been going on before us. So, it's a work we're trying to do in a way that doesn't negate the need for independence, or let's say an empowered relation to technology, but I think, thinking with you, like how to complement the vocabulary of autonomy, independence and sovereignty, we can somehow attach some other frameworks that can be useful, to both think about, let's say the path, like what we're working towards, but also about the lives that are implicated in this trying to make this path happen.

FS: 30:03   I mean, obviously connected, but trying to work through or being differently comfortable with autonomy. And so, just so you know, the writing on feminist servers happened in a conference that was called, or rather that was asking the question whether autonomy was possible or impossible. And I was really frustrated with this question, because I was not sure if that was the question I wanted to work with. And literally, this sparked thinking about feminist server in this way of thinking, okay,

trying not to apologize for not being available. You know, this kind of language really comes in from an attempt to shift the question, yeah, and shift the energy to another place.

LIVING DIFFERENT ECONOMIES

sp: 31:05   Now, I'm talking about cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminism is not easy, because we want to work with feminists and for feminists and with them and so on. But many feminists are still not really clear on the importance technical infrastructure has for their own struggle. So, sometimes we are just not heard, or it's very difficult to raise awareness and create some meaningful debate about those studies. And I totally understand. I mean, like many feminists are facing very urgent matters, as we know, violence, and a lot of situations. It's very difficult to say, you need to pay attention now to the backend of your devices and so on. Or, the importance to use free software. And on the other side, in the world of free software and technical infrastructure, it's difficult, you know, the inclusion of feminism in a very male dominated world where those issues are still not important or are not valued.

sp: 32:06   We are a little bit in an interface, where it's difficult to communicate with the two sites. I'm saying this, because I think that the possibility to create a more resilient world... because here in the feminist servers, there's very different initiatives, you know. Some initiatives, they are okay, it's experimental, and we are using the space to learn about how to administrate the server and those things mentioned, but some initiatives are really trying to go to [become] a cooperative of self-employment that is liberating them. There's sustainability, there's a community using it, and, of course, the stress and the psychological burden and physical burden is very inequal between different initiatives. So, I'm saying that, because I think that the only way to push forward is like, there's an increasing understanding by activists around the world, and I'm not talking only about feminists, saying all the people that are committed to social movements and that trained to this matter, what is happening right now on this planet, and they need to become really more autonomous, you know, in their technical infrastructure in general. And inside this, one part would be the women in social movements and the feminist movements and so on. So, I think, we might go there at one moment, but I think we are still, you know, there's still a lot of explaining what is a server, raising awareness and underlining what is happening when you are censored, when you are loosing your content, when your contacts are gone because you have been, just like that, silenced by

media monopolies, social media platforms and so on, and to connect the dots.

FS: 33:49   But would you, when you think about how to deal with the limited resources of a life, or the lives that are involved, like, how are you thinking about this, the possibility of changing the exhaustion and the burnouts that seem to…

sp: 34:17   I think the needs, like, when I was talking the other day, I'm in a lot of infrastructure projects that contains one in each other, so, I think that it's important that people that are engaging in feminist servers can be also in social lodging cooperatives where they can cover their lodging needs. So they, you know, it's like they need to imbricate one in each other. It cannot be like, yeah, completely separate. So, and this is also a very difficult process, to imbricate all the things together, but I think that they, we need to work with the social and solidarity economy that can cover our lodging, food and health needs, and all these needs to work together. But this is maybe, I don't know, if we will do it in one lifetime, but this is what some of us are trained to do, at least.

FS: 35:07   Yeah, to work at least on multiple levels. Not all, but since the work is interconnected that would …

sp: 35:16   … and maybe at one moment, there will be two things imbricating, and it will be, you know, like just pushing towards each other, and it's going to be like, I don't know … a massive explosion!

FS: 35:28   Well, I mean, what I see in this sentence that the feminist server tries very hard not to apologize for when she is not available, I think, this is a crucial sentence, because when you do a technological work as a feminist, understanding that most feminists are involved in multiple projects – out of the understanding that multiple projects need attention – so they're often in situations of scarcity when it comes to time, and at the same time very sensitive to demands from outside, plus working in technologies that are based on service and [require] one hundred percent response as the standard, that producers exhaustion, this is untenable. So, this is why I think, it's urgent to work on ways to deal with limits both in understanding that we might not be, or I'm quite sure, it's not about replacing the alphabet companies with another, free software-based performance system.

FS: 36:57   So, technical diversity, like radical technical diversity is important,
                  technologies that somehow are not hiding their resources are important,
                  technologies that are able to somehow communicate their ends and
                  limits, and relations with them that are not dependent nor – how do you
                  call this when you over-expect, which is kind of the other part of the
                  dependency… I think, if I look at the people doing interesting server
                  work, they get caught in this double standard, so we need to change the
                  expectations, the language, the technologies themselves and the
                  practices around it. That is what needs to happen, because otherwise,
                  yeah, you can't do both at the same time. And, I think, some of the
                  feminist server projects try to do that: be technologically proud, and
                  equally performant, and at the same time, do all the feminist work of
                  understanding how to rotate roles, how to implement other pedagogies
                  around them, and that is psychologically and physically a split that no
                  one can hold.

FUTURE VISIONS

sp: 38:31   What you were saying is very touching for me, and for me it's important
                  to say that I need to name the other feminist server initiatives. I need to
                  say their name, and to say that I think of them a lot and I communicate
                  with a lot of them, and I wish, everybody was better… hm … because,
                  they are not only administrating servers, they are doing so many other
                  things, they are incredible feminists, they are educating the people
                  around them and making trainings and doing digital security… and
                  audits, and writing and researching and supporting land defenders, you
                  know, they are so awesome. So yeah, I just wanted to name the names. I
                  want to say that some of the feminist serves that are around now, that I
                  love and respect, and I mirror myself on them like *anarchaserver*, *kefir*,
                  and there is *systerserver*, and *clandestinas*, and *vedetas*, and
                  matriar.cat, and *maadix*, and *codigosur* …

sp: 39:35   … and if there are others that I did not say right now, it is because I am a
                  little bit … you, the interview. That's very important for me, because I
                  really want, you know, if the future can be brighter for all those amazing
                  persons, all the amazing women and feminists, it's going to be better for
                  everybody. Basically, they're really, their lives are oriented to fight
                  capitalism and patriarchy, and try to mitigate the situation of urgency
                  and the planet eating itself and all this situation that is creating so much
                  violence for so many people. So, I just want to underline this, how much
                  I love them, and that it is very meaningful what they do, and that I wish
                  sometimes that we could focus more our energy, because we are all over
                  the place, because we need to do so many important things – now,

tomorrow, yesterday – so they could have a little bit more time, time for breathing and pace to experiment and break things and reinstall and reinstall and document. That would be super great. So, my vision for the future is something like this, you know, more time for breathing, for friends and so on.

CS: 40:50   Thank you.

FS: 40:51   It's clear, I wish that the feminist server administrators are better, in better space, for sure. But I also wish more ongoingness, I think, ways that we can pull our different resources and brains together to live graciously in ungracious times.

LIST OF FEMINIST SERVERS

https://kefir.red
https://vedetas.org
https://codigosur.org
https://maadix.net
https://clandestina.io
https://systerserver.net
http://matriar.caT
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