

n.paradoxa

online, issue 5

November 1997

Editor: Katy Deepwell

Published in English as an online edition
by KT press, www.ktpress.co.uk,
as issue 5, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*
<http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue5.pdf>
Nov 1997, republished in this form: January 2010
ISSN: 1462-0426

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Cyberknitting event at Ostranenie

Katy Deepwell

The Cyberknitting event, which took place at Ostranenie film festival in Dessau on Saturday 8 November, was initiated by Nina Czegledy. The idea for the event arose from discussions amongst some of the participants at the Crossing Over workshop in Sofia last year.

CYBERKNITTING (for men and women) is an attempt to build upon the convergence and/or discrepancy of:

1. Knitting: as an ancient activity, usually practised by women and lately by men (ref. to primary meaning of : to weave/ purl/ crochet/ hook/ knot/ intertwine/ braid/ sew yarn into fabric, with needles)

2. Cyberknitting: as a recent activity of networking within the Internet, usually practiced by men and lately by women (ref. to the metaphorical meaning of : to draw together and join closely, to spin a story.

Prior to the event, the invited Cyberknitters were encouraged to send in pages for the website:

1. to explore the Cyber knitting metaphor and present their research at the festival. Presentations were asked to be informal in style with the aim of provoking discussion.

2. to propose a favourite knitting pattern for their own page background. Their text will be set against this background on the web-space. The two streams of input from: virtual cyber knitters and on-site participants will be processed on the web-site after Ostranenie .

The first Cyberknitting Show contained the following stitches:

A public discussion, slightly moderated by the cyberknitters in charge, with the crucial contribution of the invited cyberknitters + subtle performance (physical theater, video and web images & texts, sound environment).

On stage at the beginning of the event were a number of participants attempting to define the problems and meanings of cyber-knitting: Nina Czegledy, Iliyana Nedkova, Calin Dan, Katy Deepwell (who chaired the event), Erika Pastor, Tapio Makela, Inke Arns, and Edi Muka

The event began with Tapio Makela's electronic recounting of an imaginary history of cyberknitting where genders and technologies were remixed to analyse precisely the limitations of gender stereotyping and the power of histories in controlling illusionary destinies. Iliyana Nedkova began by offering a brief history of the generation of the term cyberknitting from discussions in Sofia. Cyberknitting could be a different metaphor for the 'information super-highway' ; one which emphasised relationships and connection between people rather than technological development. Erika Pastor raised the importance of narrative as a means of changing understanding and it was the potential in this which interested her. Inke Arns, sceptically suggested that her dislike of knitting as a girl, meant she was reluctant to take up the metaphor. She immediately proposed as an alternative: human-netting. (She had brought with her the only jumper she ever knitted). Katy Deepwell responded with the idea that a reinvestment in seemingly negative terms, including craft and knitting, had offered a radical potential to redefine a field in the past, most notably amongst feminist artists. Edi Muka suggested that the metaphor could address the problems of Eastern European countries by its emphasis on connecting the individual to the state through civil society. Could cyberknitting allow for the net activity to be seen in more complex terminology and with greater social and political awareness than has been the pattern to date? Would it enable, as Nina Czegledy had hoped, that greater attention would now be paid to social and gender relations in the context of a larger political framework? Would the increasing involvement of women in net-activities act as a means to redefine both gender relations and East/West relations in media art?

As those on stage struggled to define the project, the simultaneous performance by GROUP BAZA: Vladimir Barbul, Vera Midic & Branka Milicic-Davic had already started. Inspired by the ideas behind cyberknitting and the atmosphere of the event , the performance actions of Group Baza were intended to question the wide-spread practice of conference-making and test the conventional roles employed in conferences between moderators, key speakers, participants, audience. While one performer knitted the audience together with wool, climbing under the chairs and wrapping their ankles, in the hope of linking them closer together, another member of the group intervened on the stage, mimicking the mechanical repetitive actions needed in mechanical production. As the performance continued, those assembled on the stage were gradually knitted to members of the audience by the red wool and

then several were steadily lifted from the stage, even as they spoke, by members of Group Baza.

As the performers were slowly one-by-one removed from the stage. Katy Deepwell and Erika Pastor were left on the stage to try to continue their enquiry into politics and relations behind the metaphor of cyberknitting. They too then voluntarily left the stage and went into the audience to enquire about their views. Meanwhile, the sound by Denis Neimand was installed as an environment in the background. Group Baza intervened at one moment, even in this sphere, replacing at one point his more calculated mixing of two tapes of Russian singers imitating birds and the powerful roll of a drumbeat generated on top of a waterholder at a former nuclear power station with Serbian folk music!

Irony and contradiction seemed to be the order of the day yet without a collapse



Above: Andrea Otero *Der Glaserne Bauch* (1997)

into anarchy. Instead what was created had all the qualities of simulacra, with those on stage attempting to grasp or develop a notion like cyberknitting, and to bring together different realities, different perspectives in the middle of an excessive overload of actions, events, noise and visual imagery was the point of the hour.

Meanwhile, the audience, made increasingly aware of their passivity as they

Right: Francesca da Rimini & Josephine Starrs *White* (1996)

Far right: Zoran Solomun & Helga Reidemeister *Frauen in Schwarz* (1997)

Below: Susan Hinum *Woman's Gotta Have It* (1996)

Below, right: Monika Wenczel *Turn Around*



were tied to each other, was bombarded with images from the selected video works, screened on two large projections. The video selection by Nina Czegledy for the event included :- the films of Lisette Stalenhoeft *Zonder Titel* (1996), Caterina Borelli *Page 1, Page 2*; Constance Westhofen *My Body is My Castle* (1996).

Interview with Branka Milicic-Davic after the Ostranenie event

Branka Milicic-Davic: My video in *Crossing Over* is connected to the performance of group Baza in Cyberknitting. At the *Crossing Over* workshop we were talking about the bad feeling of sitting at conferences for hours and hearing nothing interesting. We started to joke and laugh about it but it turned into a more serious project. Knitting always fascinated me - it is just one line. Yet there is a lot you can make out of it. With simple knitting you are creating something but if you pull about your pullover you would see it was just one line. My work is very minimalist. I don't use a lot of props or set designs - the same is true in knitting. This was the first idea/impulse. The second that conferences should be ruined in order to bring people together more. If someone is attacking you, you would look around for someone who could help you. That's what I realised people did. We somehow simulated a chaotic situation in which people were communicating in a strange way. At the conference we had participation from the conference speakers and the performers who helped us bring the chairs from the stage. We went under the audience's chairs to make an experience of how it will be in another world - knitted & out of sight. To see what's underneath at a deeper level and secondly to see how people will react.

Katy Deepwell: **There were whoops of laughter and others in the audience who were distressed at being locked in by the red wool you used to tie them together.**

Branka Milicic-Davic : We connected a lot of people with the wool but no one can tell it was not possible to move with the wool. It's more a mental blockade - you are connected with someone else in the room. In the end, the wool on stage connected with most of the audience. People, performers formed not a proper net but a strange one. That's what cyber-knitting should be.

Katy Deepwell: **So, do you think in this chaotic performance we somehow managed to reproduce or demonstrate the limits of the net - which was also the idea of cyberknitting.**

Branka Milicic-Davic : I hope people realise this because it's really limited by the simple fact that many people are not using the net - because of money and access,

it's like an expensive hobby for a few. In Yugoslavia, we have just one commercial provider. It is limited in many ways, but it is also a great possibility. Sometimes you do not have enough money or time to travel somewhere but through the internet you can be in many places in a way. You can collect information, a lot of impressions. That's why I like some mailing lists, the East Syndicate for exchange of information, Nettime for contemplation or more serious thinking, Faces as a female list - a lot of different lists. I run a local list, local by language, but it has subscribers from 10 European and non-European countries, people who have left Yugoslavia. Different connections can be made.

Katy Deepwell : Many people in the audience commented that they were in and out of the conversation because the images of the films projected were so distracting. This it seems also happens with the net, endless graphics and very little information but much visual stimulation. The films however were full of content.

Branka Milicic-Davic: More information chaos, people are bombed by information, usually that selected by authorities and institutions, and then they are trying to select their own way. And in this search they are going everywhere across the net, pornography, real-audio, music, quick-time video. Sometimes I find myself downloading more and more and I ask myself what do I need it for? I don't need it at all. It's just an expensive toy. For people who are serious in their work, they can always make a limit. Everything is useful if you know how to use it. Just a small extent of people in our society are addicts - it's up to you how to use it for yourself.

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n.paradoxa : Issue No.5, November 1997