A Situated Archive of the Old Boys Network and its Discontents.

Part I – Artist talk

Explorative Talk #1 with Cornelia Sollfrank at ruruHaus, Kassel
Thursday, September 02, 2019, 5.00 pm
Manual for the Dying. Work in progress.
Participants: Saskia Mattern, Martin Groh, Fred Hansen, Erick Beltran,
www.documenta-archiv.de/en/aktuell/te…lia-sollfrank
Part one: Presentation by Cornelia Sollfrank
Second part: Artwarez – A-situated-archive-of-the-old-boys-network-and-its-discontents-1

Frederikke Hansen (00:01):

Okay. I think we can begin. I'd like to welcome everyone here to ruruHaus to our first explorative talk in a working group with the name Manual for the Dying. My name is Frederikke Hansen. I'm part of the artistic team of documenta 15 together with Andrea, Ayshe and many more. I'd like to welcome Cornelia Sollfrank – on a Zoom connection because of the train strike. We were supposed to be here together today, but it's brilliant that you can be here digitally. It even fits in a way the theme somehow with Old Boys Network, I guess. Anyhow, with me, I also have Erick Beltran; we have invited Erick to be artistic, editor of two series of books, or actually one is not a series. One will be a book, one volume, Manual for the Dying. So, we have invited Erick also to take part in this explorative talk today. Saskia and Martin, maybe you want to present yourselves?

Saskia Mattern (01:40):

Hello everyone. My name is Saskia Mattern, and I'm from the document archive and I'm happy to see you all here and hope we have a good time together.

Martin Groh (01:53):

My name is Martin Groh. I am scientific researcher at the documenta archive.

Frederikke Hansen (01:57):

I think we will also be joined at some point by our colleague Reza. He is one of our two colleagues from Jakarta who have moved here are making this magnificent living room in Kassel, ruruHaus. The idea was in a way that it should be like a living room, with sofas, but now we have this more formal setup, but it is our hope that we can have a more informal talk, a more explorative talk where you're very welcome to chip in after Cornelia's presentation, which I believe is approximately 15 minutes. Is this correct? Is it's informal. So, you just take the time you need, Cornelia. Erick, maybe you also want to say a few words presenting yourself and the, Cornelia, maybe you can present yourself and then go directly into the presentation.

Erick Beltran (03:01):

Well, I'm part of the editorial team. We are developing this Manual for the Dying, which started as a practical manual, where we wanted to explore what is like the fact of dying or diminishing in a circuit.

And it started with the idea of how to handle the estate of an artist, or how to handle a large group of work and what to do with it. Why is it important, the idea of the archive and how to connect information to different frameworks and different people and different circuits in general. And, this idea expanded into ask in itself, why is it important, the idea of being connected and what can be dying in the moment? We can think about gestures. We can think about languages, methodologies, strategies, and, we are exploring this and the world we are in, in the moment, we are going to have like a series of events like this, where we will ask different people and different people involved in activating or rethinking, what is documentation, and what is it for, and what is let's say existing and what makes something appear.

Frederikke Hansen (04:51): Cornelia.

Cornelia Sollfrank (04:52):
Okay, great. Thank you. So good afternoon to everyone. There in Kassel at ruraHaus. First, I have to say how sorry I am that I cannot be there with you on site at ruruHaus. I was so excited to travel again and participate in a real-life meeting and meet actual people. But, in terms of Corona, it would be possible with restrictions, but then train strike came, as you mentioned. And I would have, it would have been impossible for me to come, but it would not have been possible to go back home again. So, I decided rather not to make this experiment. Okay, you also asked me to introduce myself. My name is Cornelia Sollfrank. I mainly identify as artist, but I do many things under this umbrella of being an artist, amongst other things, I do research, I write and I also consider myself to be an educator.

C.S. (05:57):
Some basic information is that I was trained as a classical artist. I started painting and then I turned out to become a cyberfeminist 10 years later. So, as you can imagine, there was some sort of development in between. I participated in the mid nineties and the emerging internet and net art and net culture scene. Part of that was also involved in documenta 10, at HybridWorkspace, which I will talk a little bit about today, the Old Boys Network. I did also individual works. Maybe another interesting fact would be that I did a lot work in groups, in collectives with feminist agendas. At the same time, I also continued an individual practice, but in this individual practice, I very often contested like the basic parameters of modernism, like authorship and originality and things like that.

C.S. (07:03):
So, this is just some basic information. And, I've been asked to speak 20 to 30 minutes, actually, we'll see. I mean, we can do it in a dialogical way, and I hope that my input will trigger a lively discussion because as you can imagine, there are many, many issues related to building an archive of a project that was a collective project, but also a processual project that shifted its appearance and shape throughout its existence – the Old Boys Network. So, in my talk, I will first give a brief introduction to OBN, and after that I'll suggest a few framing concepts for the archiving work. And, I'll end up with a few urgent questions that I would also like to discuss with you. But before I start, I would also like to get an idea of how the space looks like, how many other people are there, because the camera looks only in one direction. I can only see four people who else is there. Please tell me,

F.H. (08:10):
Can we swirl the camera?

C.S. (08:12):

Is probably not necessary, just give me a brief impression.

F.H. (08:16):

I'd say there are about 25 people in rather informal setup, because of social distancing, hard to tell how many are Kasselers; probably not that many, I don't know.

C.S. (08:36):

Oh, okay. Now I can see it's great. Thank you. So, I start with a small presentation, a slideshow. I think it's easier to get the idea, if you also get some images. Can you see the images? So first of all, as I already mentioned, I will talk about the project Old Boys Network. The Old Boys Network described itself as the first international cyberfeminist alliance, and was active for five years. Founded in 1997, the connecting element of the network was the term cyberfeminism. The formulated concern of the organization – here is a screenshot of the website – was to create spaces in which cyberfeminists can research, experiment, communicate and act. Such spaces include virtual ones, such as the cyberfeminist server and the old boys mailing list as well as temporary meetings, such as workshops and international conferences. All the activities have the purpose of providing a contextualized presence for different artistic, theoretical and political formulations related to cyberfeminism. At times mysterious, at times transparent, OBN is setting an agenda for communication, intervention and production.

C.S. (10:05):

And this is a quote from the website. And, as you said, Fred, cyberfeminism was about virtuality, about the internet and being connected, but it was also a very, very important aspect of OBN to meet in flesh, to have regular meetings and to work together. The initiative to found OBN goes back to an invitation to participate in the Hybrid Workspace in Kassel in 1997. As part of documenta 10, ten groups were invited to work, discuss, present, and publish as part of the world's largest exhibition of contemporary art. This required a new initiative that would complement tactical media activism with gender specific themes, thus countering the male dominated digital underground and hacker culture, and develop an experimental approach to intertwining gender political issues with aesthetic strategies. OBN was founded in Berlin in early summer 1997. And so, the idea was born to use the invitation to Kassel, to hold the first Cyberfeminist International conference.

C.S. (11:22):

From the beginning, we put a huge emphasis on our organizational form, which should remain flexible. And at the same time, adhere to certain principles. The slogan, "The Mode is the Message. The Code is the Collective" was representative of our concern to include awareness of the conditions of production and presentation as an essential feature of the quality of a work, which is why it was also important to develop our own structures and forms of organization. Codifying the rules as part of the FAQ on our website, made this approach transparent and acted as an invitation to join in, to question and to help shape the structure. For the first conference in Kassel, OBN decided to publish an open call. And as far as possible, invite anyone who had expressed interest to propose a personal approach to cyberfeminism and to participate. 36 positions were finally presented under the motto "Targetting content: cyberfeminism." To capture the spirit of the moment, we jointly wrote and published the 100 anti-theses, which describe what cyberfeminism is not. Later, this manifesto drawn by OBN would find its way into art history, for example, in the anthology, *The 20th Century, a Century of Art in Germany* published by Staaatliche Museen zu Berlin in 1999. In 2002, art historian Verena Kuni described this manifesto as a parody of the self-explanatory rhetoric common to manifestos.

C.S. ([13:09](#)):

In principle, however, the manifesto signals the agreement of OBN, in this case the participants of the of the conference, not to provide any definitions of the term cyberfeminism, not to make any generally valid statements and instead to place individual approaches on an equal footing.

In the five years that OBN was active, three international conferences were organized in different personal constellations. After Kassel, the next Cyberfeminist International followed in 1999 in Rotterdam. And here you can see some of our visuals that have been created along the way…

In 2001, we held the very Cyberfeminist International in Hamburg. We published the conference proceedings with all the individual contributions in three printed readers. And in addition, there were numerous appearances at international festivals and conferences and contributions by OBN to exhibitions and publications. OBN contributions were realized, for example, at the international performance symposium in Frankfurt, at the Festival for Electronic Arts in Maribor, at Next Five Minutes, the festival for tactical media in Amsterdam, at the international women's university, ifu, in 2000 in Hanover, the exhibition *Mondo immaginario* at Shedhalle in Zürich, or the symposium Dialogues and Debates, an international symposium on feminist positions in contemporary art at the Künstlerinnenhof Die Höge, or in the exhibition *net.condition* at ZKM Karlsruhe.

C.S. ([14:51](#)):

This list is certainly not complete, but it already gives an impression of the different fields and discourse to which OBN has connected and could be connected, namely art, here in particular media art, performance art, but also media activism, feminist science and philosophy of science, and feminist art criticism.

This were just some impressions of the activities of OBN. Now, the question, why an archive of the Old Boys Network should be addressed. This is quite simple to answer, because of the currently great interests in topics around gender and technology, and the relevance of these topics in our current condition. In recent years, there has been a real boom, which also indicates that our pioneering work in the nineties is now bearing fruit. In this context, cyberfeminism is regularly referred to as a historical precursor. While there is substantial academic literature on cyberfeminism, little survives that provides access to the networking spirit of the time, particularly the workings of the Old Boys Network.

C.S. ([15:58](#)):

This lack of archival material has regularly led to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of OBN's work leading to the realization that existing historical files and documents should be collected and processed and transferred to an openly accessible archive. And the challenge here is to capture aspects of the process and the underlying effects of our work and network and not just collect individual documents, such as publications.

I also brought some impressions of the material that we are currently sorting and making an inventory of; I'm just just browsing through, some ephemera, events we organized, e.g. the conference Techniques of Cyberfeminism. Here's the table with printed material because we have large numbers of CDs, CD-ROMs and all sort of technical formats of which we have to see what is still running and working and functional; many, many photos. This is basically in my storage where all the stuff has been sitting, so far, photos, again, CDs, tapes, video tapes.

C.S. ([17:13](#)):This is of particular interest, because this is a box with all the documentary video material of our last conference, in which we had very, very heated discussions, which basically also led to the end of

the Old Boys Network. And this is very for me very delicate and also valuable material, which never has been evaluated, so far. And I think, uh, this box of about 14 hours of video material really needs to be, not just digitized, but transcribed and analyzed – and discussed in order to, not just understand what happened back then, but if I look at this material from today's perspective, where I have much more experience in collective work, for example, I can see that there are certain patterns in groups and in collectives that are being repeated. And I can see a certain lack of skills in collaborating because in our education and our socialization, we hardly learn how to freely collaborate and build inclusive and equal structures that really function.

C.S. (18:31):

So, that's why I find that these videotapes are particularly interesting. But it's such a comprehensive part of the archive that I think it should be a project in itself to work on this material…

This is a video that we did as Old Boys Network, where we presented each of us in 90 seconds our approach to cyberfeminism; again, some archive pictures from folders with ephemera, stickers we produced. Some of them do still exist, you even find them every now and then sticking to some wall stores, et cetera. And this is the table with all the material. Here are two of my collaborators, Julia [Stslba] and Malin [Kuht] who helped me building the inventory, the spreadsheet, which we're working on at the moment, which will be the basis of everything that will follow up analog and digital archive.

C.S. (19:37):

Okay. So that should give you a short impression of what it was. And I have to emphasize again how important it is to see Old Boys Network in the spirit of its time, for once, which was in the nineties, where we had this upheaval with the internet that was coming with this utopia that the internet would provide with independent spaces where we could act and get organized and do things independently from a traditional power systems as the art world, et cetera. And of course, we have learned somewhere else now. So that was also for me an important finding, because cyberfeminism often is very much romanticized today. And I think we really have to locate it in its time and the spirit of the time and understand how we can transfer the critical thinking, that was also involved of course in the nineties, to the contemporary in the current condition.

C.S. (20:42):

And for that matter, I also wrote, published this year, a text "The art of getting organized. A different approach to the Old Boys Network" – different also, because I think we should not only look at the material that was published, at the texts, at the books, at the manifestations of this network, but also try to explore and analyze the underlying affects and the spirit of the network, but also how it connected to the spirit of the time. And I tried to capture it in this text "The art of getting organized" that was published in the catalog *Computer Grrrls*,[1] and it's freely available, the whole catalog as PDF under this address. One thing I also would like to mention is that I do not use the term cyberfeminism today any longer. The reason is that I really want cyberfeminism to be understood as a phenomenon of its time,

C.S. (21:40):

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[1] "The Art of Getting Organised. A Different Approach to the Old Boys Network" Cornelia Sollfrank, in *Computer Grrrls*, eds. Inke Arns and Marie Lechner, Dortmund: Kettler, 2021. Free PDF: https://hmkv.de/files/hmkv/ausstellungen/03_Archiv/2018/GRLS/05_Publikation/GRLS_Magazin_digital_mit_Cover.pds

which does not mean that gender and technology related issues are no longer relevant. They are highly relevant, but to indicate this historical situatedness, I prefer now to work with the term technofeminism. And it's a term that has been suggested in 2004 by techno- sociologist Judy Wajcman. Basically, technofeminism says two things: that technology is not neutral, is never neutral, and that technology is a highly gendered field; not just a gendered field, but it's always embedded in power relations that are also social and political power relations. So, this very basic approach is very helpful. And also, in the work of, when I talked about why we need an archive of the Old Boys Network, it was really my experience of the last years within renewed interest that I found that there is a lack of understanding of our historical work which led, as I said, to a lot of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, also in terms of our understanding of politics.

C.S. ([22:49](#)):

That's why I also felt the need to formulate a position, which is an updated position. And I did that with the publication of this book, *The beautiful Warriors. Technofeminist Praxis in 21st Century*.[2] It was published two years ago in English and in German, *Die schönen Kriegerinnen*.[3] And I invited a variety of colleagues, collaborators, friends from all over the world to contribute contemporary technofeminist perspectives. It is a very diverse book that really demonstrates how relevant these positions are. And maybe, one other thing to mention, we called ourselves OBN an international network. But, of course, what was considered international in 1997 was different than what we consider international today. I think the world is much smaller and we are trying to be much more aware and inclusive of many parts of the world, which we did not consider so much in the nineties.

C.S. ([23:50](#)):

So it was limited who had access to OBN and our material back then, but then it was also stunning to see how, for example, today's cyberfeminists in Latin America, or Southeast Asia still refer to cyberfeminism and the work of OBN, however, interpreting it a completely different way within their own cultural and political conditions. So, that is one publication, which is also kind of in the trajectory. Another publication I would like to mention briefly is this book, *Aesthetics of the Commons*,[4] which was published early this year, and that is an outcome of a research project on the digital commons. The research project was called "Creating Commons," we were particularly interested in artists and aesthetic practices that create digital comments, meaning for example, digital infrastructures, tools, programs, or educational formats, this kind of things of work that are usually not considered in classical aesthetics.

C.S. ([24:58](#)):

It was really our interest to make a very strong statement with this publication to also to include this kind of work, which is working on the commons as an aesthetic practice and include it also in aesthetic theory. You can also download it for free under this link here. And a third small publication I would like to mention is *Fix my Code*.[5] That's an ebook I published in spring this year with Chinese programmer Winnie Soon, where we particularly look at one of my early digital works, the net.art generator from 1997, which is still operational today. It's one of the rare examples of early digital work, and we look at it

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[2] *The beautiful Warriors. Technofeminist Praxis in 21st Century*, Sollfrank, Cornelia (ed.), minorcompositions, 2019. Free download: https://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=976

[3] *Die schönen Kriegerinnen. Technofeministische Praxis im 21. Jahrhundert*, Sollfrank, Cornelia (Hrsg.), transversal texts, Vienna 2018. Free download: https://transversal.at/books/die-schonen-kriegerinnen

[4] Aesthetics of the Commons, Niederberger, Shusha, Sollfrank, Cornelia, Stalder, Felix, (eds.), Diaphanes, Zürich, 2021. Free download: https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/aesthetics-of-the-commons-6419

[5] *Fix my Code*, Sollfrank, Cornelia and Soon, Winnie, EECLECTIC, Berlin, 2021. Free download: https://eeclectic.de/produkt/fix-my-code/

in terms of collaboration, who is involved in collaborating and who is basically helping to preserve and keep this work alive.

C.S. ([25:57](#)):

I had an ongoing conversation with Winnie Soon who is a digital expert, a programmer, creative coder, because as you can imagine, digital work living on the internet constantly breaks because the internet is a living organism and things change all the time. So, it's a constant effort to keep this alive. This book can be seen in the context of keeping digital works alive, which is a completely different challenge from traditional artworks. I'll keep it there. I could give a whole talk about that, but I would like to end with, with suggesting a few concepts or introducing a few concepts that are inspirational for the archival process. One is the concept of "**situatedness**," and I think I will not go deeper into that probably you are anyway familiar with this concept, but to give you an idea of what the thinking realm is in which we are operating: situatedness is a concept suggested by Donna Haraway in the context of philosophy of science and search for feminist objectivity. It basically assumes that the conditionality of all knowledge and in particular scientific knowledge, meaning that there is no such thing as an objective truth or objectivity.

C.S. ([27:21](#)):

And I introduced this concept because the title of the talk is A Situated Archive, which is related to one of the questions I'm going to introduce in a minute; it is the question who can, who is entitled to create such an archive, and from what perspective are we looking, am I looking when we are creating this archive? And I think this always needs to be part of an archive, to make really transparent, who made it and under what perspectives and conditions, et cetera. So, the second concept is the concept of "**care**" that also has become rather popular and mainstream in the last years. It is a concept that feminists have been thinking and discussing and talking about and writing and researching for a very long time, because this classical aspect of reproductive work that was traditionally often done by women and even Marxist thinking has left out this notion of reproductive work in its economic thinking.

C.S. ([28:29](#))

That's why I'm particularly interested in bringing it back on the table and also seeing an archive in the context of care and care work, not only in the sense of taking care of the actual material, but also an expanded notion of care, which situates care, or describes care as a relationship to the world. I'd like to briefly suggest, or introduce a definition by Toronto and Fisher who suggests that caring is, "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web. So, this understanding of care, and how this, again, relates to technology and how we deal with technology, I think is a super important issue at the moment.

C.S. ([29:36](#)):

The third concept is the concept of "**micropolitics**" as introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1980s. Also, very briefly, it's about expanding an understanding of politics by not only focusing on macro-political phenomena, but also considering underlying affects that drive politics. And, I think also particularly today, in respect of social media, that are operating on a highly affective manner and creating such an enormous impact in politics, I think, it's a super important concept to study and to look and understand micropolitics. In this text, I mentioned before, I try to apply this micro-political thinking to the Old Boys Network in the nineties and get a better understanding of what the affects were that were driving our work back then. Last but not least, the concept of "**Organizational Aesthetics**," which is one of the few concepts that really call themselves aesthetics, referencing aesthetic theory,

C.S. ([30:46](#)):

however, opening completely up from traditionalist aesthics. It was introduced by Russian philosopher Olga Goriunova. It's a very complex concept which simply can be described that power of organizational forms, as she describes, is not only in connecting and organizing existing phenomena, but to create such formations and organizational structures that they enable to produce something new and in particular produce new subjectivities. And that is, and has been, one of my main theoretical references in the last years. It's very rich, and Olga is one of the few who wrote a whole book on that, and also referring back to a Russian tradition of the 1920s, taking herself the liberty to neglect Western aesthetic thinking. This brings me to my last point, which I mentioned in the beginning, the questions I'm dealing with at the moment, the questions, as you can imagine, if you're building an archive of such a formation – in the text, I tried to describe how processual the Old Boys Network was, and how

C.S. ([32:01](#)):

it was never clear what it actually was and who belongs to it and not, and, and that was also intentional. We tried to make it very [fluid]. So, the question who is entitled to create an archive of such a hybrid collective and processional formation. And for me personally, the question, what is my role in it? I've been one of the initiators of the Old Boys Network. I've been one of the few members who was participating from beginning to end. And I'm probably the only one who kept all the material that you could see before. So, what is my role? What was my role in the Old Boys Network, but what can be, should be my role now, in the archiving process, what are the dangers involved in the archiving? What might be strategies to open up the archiving process? So, this is, for example, one question we have been discussing. Another question is, what are ways to include the processual and affective dimensions of such a project. I've already touched upon that?

C.S. ([33:00](#)):

Of course, we are currently making an inventory of the manifestations, of texts, of publications, of images, artworks, manifestos, et cetera. But what is the relationship between this material and the underlying dynamics? How can we develop strategies to analyze and capture these dynamics, also in the context of micropolitics, and thirdly, how can we make the archive as accessible as possible. Where must the material be stored and how not to neglect the question under what legal conditions and under what technical conditions? For me also very important is the question, who should take care of the material in the long run, because for me, one incentive to build the archive and to collaborate with document archive is to pass on the responsibility; possibly to collaborate, but also not being solely responsible for the material.

So, I thank you for your patience. I hope I didn't go too long and I'm really looking forward to our discussion. Thank you.