

## A Note to Introduce Joanna Walsh's 9 1/2 *EXEMPLARY THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS* (from *Woman Sitting in Front of a Screen*)

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“Where is the face in interface? Where is the soft in ware? What is soft and where?”

Joanna Walsh

VALIE EXPORT's *Women's Art: A Manifesto* (1972) discussed the importance of women controlling social and communication media. The manifesto stated that “women have not yet come to themselves because they have not had a chance to speak in so far as they had no access to the media.”<sup>1</sup> In one of her most renowned performances, *TAPP und TASTKINO* (*TAP and TOUCH CINEMA*, 1968), Export walked through Vienna (and later other cities) with a box decorated to look like a movie theater strapped to her chest. People in the street were invited to swap seeing for touch, to reach inside and feel her body; behind the curtain they encountered soft flesh rather than the hardware of a screen.

“Let women speak so that they can find themselves” is what VALIE EXPORT wrote, and this is what Walsh does in her piece 9 1/2 *EXEMPLARY THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS*, part of her larger work, *Woman Sitting in Front of a Screen*, versions of which have been given as a lecture at ‘out of the air’: *Women, Creativity and Intelligence Work* at Bletchley Park (in March 2019), and at *The Revolution of Digital Languages or When Cyber Turns into Sound of Poetry—A Symposium on Post-Cyber-Feminisms* at the Migros Museum in Zurich (in April 2019), to be published by Verso Books in 2022 as the book *Girl Online: A User's Manual*. Women artists have long used text to share hidden emotions and subjective perceptions and to counterbalance predominant narratives put forward by male authors. The history of technological invention is particularly male dominated and has stereotyped women as machine operators, even though the idea of programming can be said to have been conceived of by a woman, Ada Lovelace. Donna Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985/1991) is a combination of the critique of gender-specific perceptions of technology and an imagining of a future where neither gender nor the division between the human and the machine matters anymore: “The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.”<sup>2</sup>

Haraway's “Cyborg Manifesto” influenced cyberfeminism: a movement of women artists using performance and the tropes of the mass media to respond to the male-dominated development of communication technologies. The gestures of the cyberfeminists were activist in that they gave

space for women's voices, and questioned the "labor" of working with technology—whether at a keyboard or at a screen. The corresponding *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) talked of "disrupting the symbolic from within" and being "the saboteurs of the Big Daddy mainframe."

A number of artworks by women artists give voice to alternative views on contemporary technological landscapes, by speaking other truths about us and our relationship to the technologized world. For example, consider the work of Sharon Hayes, who re-speaks the speeches of political leaders and uses the fly posters of protesters as a medium to amplify messages about lived experience, ranging from gay love to student disenfranchisement to environmental collapse. Hayes is both an artist and an activist; her bio describes her as one who "lingers in the grammars—linguistic, effective and sonic—through which political resistance appears." In her ten-hour-long performance, *My Fellow Americans, 1981–88* (2004/2008) Hayes "re-spoke" Ronald Reagan's thirty-four addresses to the nation, to "trace the significance of Reagan's domestic rhetoric in the overall Republican project to lay claim to public political imagination."<sup>3</sup> Walsh's *9 1/2 EXEMPLARY THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS*, like Hayes's work, is also performed—spoken aloud, embodied—to change the perception of the listeners to the technological construction of the world around them, both its promise and its lived reality. It begins, in Walsh's words, from "the precarious position of the woman sitting in front of the screen, working onscreen while working on her self in order to put that self to work onscreen."

The sociologist Sherry Turkle has written about technology and its ability to distance us, to silence our needs in favor of a collective sigh, which we each experience separated by our screens. Walsh's text moves us from this loneliness of the distributed crowd to consider anew the individual rewards of being seen and heard. Writing about Walsh's earlier acclaimed work *Break.up* (2018), Turkle has said that it suggests "a new real where our emotions are always betwixt and between our devices and what feels like the ache in our heart."<sup>4</sup> In the way that her work "considers affective, domestic and gendered labor, and activism on and offline," *9 1/2 EXEMPLARY THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS* and *A Woman Sitting in Front of a Screen* redraw our understanding of prior feminist performance work, such as that of EXPORT or the cyberfeminists, in its "re-materialisation or a paying attention to materiality and its attendant processes on and offscreen."<sup>5</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Valie Export, "Women's Art: A Manifesto (1972)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 869–870.
2. Donna 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), 149–181, page 150 for the quote.
3. "My Fellow Americans, 1981–88," <http://shaze.info/work/my-fellow-americans-1981-88/>
4. "Break.up April 2018, Semiotext(e)/Tuskar Rock," <https://badaude.wixsite.com/joannawalsh>
5. "NEoN Re@ct Symposium SPEAKERS Bios and Abstracts," <https://neondigitalarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NEoN-Re@ct-Social-Change-Art-Technology-Abstracts-FINAL-1.pdf>