

# *Who are the feminist hackers?*

Traditionally, the fields of science and technology have been dominated by a fairly privileged, competitive, Euro-American, gender-biased, masculine culture. Innovation in science and technology is still driven mainly by the interests of big tech companies (O'Neil, 2019). We need to discuss 'how capitalism profits from the ongoing production of racialized difference, such as through the extraction, control, and dispossession of data, land, environment, and natural resources and exploitative labour and material conditions' (Yusoff, 2019; Margaret & Avle, 2021; Kuo et al., 2022). Feminist hackers, therefore, are dedicated to cultivating different values, with a focus on sharing, openness, decentralisation and free access as the keys to providing welcoming conditions for creating global change. They believe in the ethos of DIY, DIT<sup>8</sup> and DIWO, which allows for unblackboxing or making machines, technology and tools accessible to all (Chun, 2013; Coleman, 2013). Feminist hackers are challenging traditional Western tech narratives.<sup>9</sup> Many of them critically examine overconsumption and toxic power dynamics in technology by raising questions of de-growth and renewable energies in their art. Many aim to integrate Indigenous values for technology knowledge and reshape the accelerationist understanding

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8 Do-it-together.

9 Even before feminist hacking became relevant, there was a divide between hacking and making, with hacking being associated with traditionally masculine ideals of transgression and competition, and making associated with care and 'femininity' (Nagbot, SSL, 2016; MAXIGAS, 2012). However, others argue that there is much overlap between the two and they should not be seen as two separate entities. Feminist hackers highlight the political implications of care and repair in the tech industry, particularly regarding gendered labour (Kumar, 2017a; Rosner & Ames, 2014; Rosner et al., 2014).

of techno-solutionism. They also strive to develop alternative projects that shape the future. For example, Nicole L'Huillier, Caroline Sanders, Sarah Newman, Klau Kinky and Amelia Winger-Bearskin, among others (L'Huillier, 2018; Sanders, 2018; Newman, 2019; Winger-Bearskin, 2023).

Feminist hacking became more widely known through the Genderchangers network (Genderchangers Academy), which operated on an 'informal, ad hoc, DIY, hands-on basis in a non-purpose-driven, non-competitive atmosphere of mutual respect' with a 'focus on free and open source software as a political decision' (Genderchangers Manifesto, 2009). The yearly Eclectic Tech Carnival by the Genderchangers Collective was an exclusive safe space for marginalised communities to share tech skills and reveal the impact of hidden power structures on technological progress. These issues were addressed in the 1990s by sharing knowledge on open source technologies in spaces exclusively designated for female-identified persons.

These early cyberfeminist groups also fostered the idea of speculative fabulation inspired by science fiction (Haraway, 1988; Wajcman, 2004; Dering, 2007). Even today, these speculative methods inspire our approach towards making technology. It is generally agreed among experts that making technology is about exploring the material, site-specific, bodily and intimate aspects of design, engineering and art (Ratto & Boler, 2014b). Extending this initial aim, feminist hackers are essentially speculating on more ethical future tech to unpack how technology keeps up the status quo. How it is instrumentalised to maintain violent hegemonic gender regimes globally. Feminist hackers instead perform and exercise alternative approaches to worlding (Ahmed, 2006; Jackson, 2014). Commoning, and caring for commons, is considered an alternative approach.

Care-based commoning is a process of becoming a commoner, an entangled subjectivity, through relationships among humans and with the environment. It is a response to individual circumstances and recognises the micro-political situations of each commons. Women\*, especially, have traditionally created feminist counterspaces as a form of resistance against patriarchal oppression. These spaces allow for exaggerated and subversive gender performances and have been co-opted into broader feminist resistance movements (Federici, 2012). Feminist hack-labs such as Constant,<sup>10</sup> Deep Lab,<sup>11</sup> XXLab,<sup>12</sup> GynePunk,<sup>13</sup> Mz\* Baltazar's Lab,<sup>14</sup> Radiona<sup>15</sup> and Heart of Code,<sup>16</sup> among others, have emphasised the importance of having a physical space as a place in which resistance can flourish, based on principles of commoning, sharing, openness, care, decentralisation, de-growing and free education (Toupin, 2014b; Wuschitz, 2014; Nagbot, SSL, 2016; Savic & Wuschitz, 2018).



Workshop, *ArduinA* at Constant with Mz\* Baltazar's Lab (Lale Rodgarkia-Dara and Patrícia J. Reis), Brussels, 2013

10 <https://constantvzw.org/site/>

11 <http://www.deeplab.net/>

12 <https://honf.org/category/project-spinoff/>

13 <https://hackteria.org/wiki/GynePUNK>

14 <https://www.mzbaltazarlaboratory.org/>

15 <https://radiona.org/>

16 <http://heartofcode.org/>

# *Feminist hacking roots*

## *Feminist technoscience and cyberfeminism*

Feminist hacking draws upon the ideas and work of techno-feminists (Wajcman, 2004, 2006) and cyberfeminists (Braidotti, 1996; Hall, 1996; Sollfrank, 2002), including influential figures such as Donna Haraway, VNS Matrix, Linda Dement, Jill Scott, mez breeze and the Old Boys Network (OBN). This approach is rooted in the concept of 'situated knowledge', which challenges traditional opposites such as nature/culture, subject/object and man/woman, and examines the impact of computer technology on communication and power dynamics.

Feminist standpoint theory gives a voice to those who are subjected to a given mode of production. Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge' recognises that knowledge is complex and shaped by various factors, including personal experiences (Haraway, 1988). This idea was also formulated by Chandra Mohanty (1991, 2003), who believes that all perspectives should be open to critical examination, particularly to denounce racism in knowledge production. This mode of understanding subjectivity encompasses both a liberal perspective that sees technology as a liberating tool for fluid gender expression, and a separatist perspective that seeks to create (e.g. queer, black, writer, workers) women-only spaces in response to exploitation and harassment, both offline and online.

The rise of 'bodiless pragmatics', which revealed that virtual interactions were not free from gender biases and violence,

led to renewed interest in the material aspects of resistance through technology. Feminist hacking aims to extend the promises of cyberfeminism and reclaim technology for marginalised communities. It sees the body, gender and technology as intertwined and constantly shaping one another, and it views mutual knowledge exchange as a means of political action. Grounded in a new understanding of the relationship between the body and technology, feminist hacking empowers non-normative bodies, genders and sexualities to build their own identities and spaces in a liberating and autonomous manner (M. Dietze & Wuschitz, 2020). Claiming the right to decide over the body includes the uterus, reproductive rights and abortion. Ultimately, this perspective seeks to undo oppression and exploitation legitimated through illegitimate hierarchies.

Feminist hackers want to understand the fleeting, yet powerful, influence of matter in the present moment. This perspective rejects metaphysics and is closely connected to being present. Our perspectives are shaped by our interactions/intra-actions with others, including humans, species, environments and technologies.<sup>17</sup> It is important to consider the consent and intentions of others before taking action, fostering wokeness and solidarity. Both the DIY and trans-hack feminist movements strive to create a unique environment where participants can undo societal norms and hierarchies based on gender, race and class. This environment provides a space for people to explore their interests, find care and support, and heal from harmful experiences.

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17 This is not limited to our experiences of using, creating, hacking and altering technology but extends to the exploitation of child labour in mining and e-waste recycling, as well as the impact of civil wars and displacement.

# *Autonomy and commoning*

Autonomous feminist movements are often associated with first-wave feminists such as Emma Goldman (1869–1940) and Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) or third-wave feminists such as Pussy Riot or the Xenofeminists. But autonomy<sup>18</sup> and commoning are rooted in prehistoric societies (Mies, 1986, 2014). As Maria Mies (2014) and Sophie Lewis (2022) pointed out, gender bias and the patriarchal nuclear family are products of early capitalism, protecting land ownership through establishing patrilineal heritage laws and implementing the ideology of state motherhood to control objects and subjects, particularly subjects labelled as ‘women’ (Suryakusuma, 1988). Commons, in contrast, were strategies of the landless to sustain a living (Federici, 2012). They were not limited to feminists: commons were crucial to the resistance of systematically discriminated groups.

Autonomy and commons are two key elements that bring together the post-1968 social–political movements in the Western world and the hacker movements. The convergence of contemporary political activism with the FLOSS (free/libre and open source software) movement, feminist hacking and critical artmaking is influenced by the DIY ethics of autonomous and anarchist punk, the individualist libertarian ethos and hacker ethics, the FLOSS ethics of decentralisation and freedom of information, hardware access and the feminist ethics of care (Kelty, 2008; Coleman, 2013; Kelty, 2014; Wajcman & Rose, 2015; Gandini, 2016).

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18 Libertarianism, popularised by individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker in the 1880s, has been adopted and co-opted by liberal thought. It has two main branches: laissez-faire capitalism; and anti-state and anti-proprietary socialist movements. Both branches reject the state and authority and advocate maximum autonomy, individual freedom

The political economy of community-based peer production, based on the hacker ethics, aims to build up commons and communities through peer-to-peer learning, prototyping, manufacturing and fixing, as a way to provide a dignified livelihood for all. This is a response to the increasing vulnerability and automation of the supply chain, which leads to decreasing wages and oppression of workers (Butollo & Nuss, 2022). And increasingly insecure conditions for racial, ethnic and sexual minorities, women, Indigenous people, migrants and peoples in the Global South (Precarity Lab, 2019). When needs cannot be met through capitalist markets, alternative forms of production and parallel economies are needed.

## *Care-full commoning*

Feminist hackers really value sharing practices and coming together through technologies, spaces and rituals (Wuschitz, 2014). These are embodied in feminist hacklabs, such as Mz\* Baltazar's Lab (Wuschitz, 2022). Feminist hacklab communities believe in care as a means of commoning, maintaining, repairing

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and voluntary association (Mises, 1944; Guérin, 1965; Day, 2005). The autonomist movement in Europe was a response to the cultural shock of 1968 and the failure of workers' struggles in Italy. It was connected to the emergence of youth countercultures, such as anarchist punk. The anarcho-punk groups in the Autonomen reject the idea of a revolutionary state and focus on anti-corporatist and workers' rights struggles, as well as animal rights, anti-war, anti-nuclear, anti-racist, anti-colonial, feminist and LGBTQIA issues, all with a DIY approach (Cleaver, 1991; Toscano, 2006; Juris, 2008). In its original sense of anarchism, the libertarian ethos stands for individual freedom and anti-establishment principles, including non-conformity, anti-authoritarianism, anti-corporatism, anti-consumerism, anti-corporate greed and direct action. The punk DIY ethos is about not 'selling out' and solving new problems with available materials (Graeber, 2013a, 2013b; McRobbie, 2016).

and improving shared workshop and culture spaces (Reis & Wuschitz, 2021). These practices help to build local communities in a sustainable way, and they provide an alternative to the insecurity and precariousness of everyday life (Dombrowski et al., 2020).



Exhibition *Revier* by Julia Frank at Mz\* Baltazar's Lab, May 2021  
Photo © Mz\* Baltazar's Laboratory

Commons refer to the social practices involved in various forms of organisation, rather than a collection of objects. The focus is on the relationships between participants and their site-specific intra-active engagement, rather than the resource itself (Wuschitz, 2014). Some theorists, such as Elinor Ostrom, believe these relationships are governed by formal rules and regulations (Ostrom, 1990, 2002). However, Ostrom's approach to commons governance is seen as exclusionary and fails to account for local norms, values and interests (Calvillo et al., 2020).

The feminist hacking and making communities, such as Mz\* Baltazar's Lab, emphasise the significance of understanding how different practices shape our beliefs and values. Accord-

ing to Calvillo, Farias and Bocchicchio (2020), these communities strive to create safer spaces where people can share their experiences and learn from one another. The use of free/libre open source technologies is a crucial element of this movement. Federici (2012) argues that understanding how the products and technologies we use are made and distributed is vital to understanding the exploitation and oppression faced by women and other marginalised groups.

The creation of open source technologies is community-driven, with the intention of providing everyone with a voice in the process of creation and distribution. Ostrom (1990) explains that community-driven technology development allows for democratic participation and the evolution of institutions for collective action. The use of the open source licence allows people to access knowledge and resources that are not controlled by corporations or governments (see interview with Rajina Shresta in Part 2). According to Haraway (2016), this aspect of open source technologies promotes the sharing of knowledge and resources, enabling communities to develop and grow collectively.



Exhibition *Resonance Sculptures & Radio Cyborg Transmitter RCT* by Reni Hofmüller  
at Mz\* Baltazar's Lab, February 2023  
Photo © Flavio Palasciano

# *Art hacking practice*

Art hacking is a method and practice in the field of media arts, art, science and technology that redefines the relationship between hacking and making (Sjöholm, 2019). It is seen as a form of communication guerrilla or guerilla art that is influenced by the impact of technology on daily life, the cultural and economic surplus in society, and the politicisation of art. Art hacking is related to hacktivism, media hacking, tactical media and reality hacking, which involves using legally questionable digital tools for socially, politically or culturally subversive purposes (Coleman, 2014).<sup>19</sup>

Artists such as Pechblenda, Mary Maggic, Paula Pin and Hannah Perner-Wilson approach hardware as an organism and use it as a tool for empowerment and resistance (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). Artists such as Ebru Kurbak and Irene Posch, Ioana Vreme Moser and Sarah Grant use unconventional materials like gold thread, water, air and slime to store information and tell stories (Ratto & Ree, 2012).

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<sup>19</sup> Art hacking has a long history dating back to the 1970s and the Fluxus movement and Happenings (Bishop, 2006). Today, artists and collectives such as subRosa, Ubermorgen, Geert Lovink, The Yes Men, Critical Art Ensemble, DoEAT Group and the Institute for Applied Autonomy use a range of tactics, from virtual sit-ins to mass protests, to raise awareness of social and political issues (Goriunova & Shulgin, 2013).



Exhibition *Genital (\*) Panic* by Mary Maggic  
at Mz\* Baltazar's Lab, December 2019  
Photo © Mz\* Baltazar's Lab

Often, art or craft workshops are used to piggyback temporary safe spaces, allowing conversations that tackle taboo issues. Efe Franca Blange and the Needle and Bitch collective in Indonesia use sewing workshops to educate women about sexual health and harassment (Sen & Hill, 2019). These collectives and individuals are pushing the boundaries of what is possible within the realm of art and technology, and they are using their work to raise awareness and effect change simultaneously. Like, for example, the DIY menstruation pad movement in Indonesia (Biyung, 2025).