# FIREweed

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A FEMINIST QUARTERLY
WRITING
ART

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# FIREweed

*n* : a hardy perennial so called because it is the first growth to reappear in fire-scarred areas; a troublesome weed which spreads like wildfire invading clearings, bombsites, waste land and other disturbed areas.

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# con-tents

4 INTRODUCTION
ERRATUM
UPCOMING ISSUES
5 GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSION

POETRY
6 PEARES & FORBIDDEN FRUIT — Angela Hryniuk
29 WHEN BREASTS SPEAK — Rita Sommers-Flanagan
31 IN PRAISE OF MATTER — Nadine Boughton
39 UNTITLED — Lisa Mestur
40 UNTITLED — Elana Moscovitch
56 CHRISTENE / HARVEST — J. Pitter
60 HEALING — Beth Goodie

CRITIQUE
8 TO BRING FORTH A VOICE: THE LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE IN TORONTO — R. Magaly San Martin

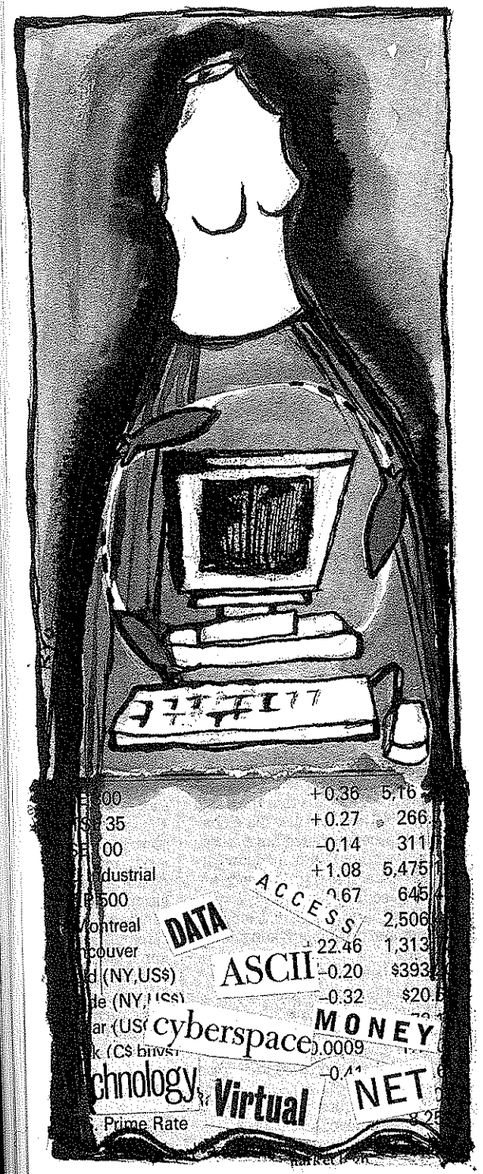
FICTION
32 TRYING SO HARD — Kerry Langan
42 I AM WEARING BLUE TODAY — Jenny Potts

SPEAKING TEXT
48 CYBERFEMINISM — Nancy Paterson

ART
64 WOMBGARD — Fredrica Mintz

REVIEWS
67 LESBOS: IN ISRAELI LESBIANS TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY, FEMINISM, JUDAISM AND THEIR LIVES — Shlomit Segal
72 PLURAL DESIRES: WRITING BISEXUAL WOMEN'S REALITIES — Kathryn Payne

65 SUBSCRIPTION INFO
75 ANNOUNCEMENTS / CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS
86 BACK ISSUES




aggression or determination should no longer be utilized to justify our continued exclusion.

One factor contributing to the discouragement of women in this field may be traced to the historical foundations of these media. The internet, a worldwide computer network, was originally a small military network of four computers known as ARPANET. This computer network was designed to research the feasibility of creating a decentralized system of communication which could survive a nuclear war. Similarly, VR (virtual reality) also had militaristic origins, having been initially envisioned as a tool for battlefield simulations. These origins are clearly acknowledged in every description of current and potential applications of these systems. However, this candor is deceptive, as no links are made between the origins of these media and the future towards which they are being driven. It is obvious that underlying assumptions are manifest in current popular applications of these media. The evidence is in the arcades, where video games such as the Sega Genesis "Night Trap" challenges players to save scantily-clad sorority sisters from a gang of hooded killers.

Margaret Benston, a Canadian activist with a background in engineering and an interest in the social and political dimensions of science and technology, in a chapter of Cheris Kramarae's book *Technology & Women's Voices* titled "Women's Voices/Men's Voices: Technology as Language," describes



Illustration by KYO

technology as a language for action and self expression.[4] Access to machinery and technology has been culturally sex-typed as masculine. In maintaining control over new technologies and by promoting and adhering to a technological world view, men have attempted to silence us. Whether or not we agree whether this world view is appropriate, it is clear that women's absence from this forum is a problem.

Despite these obstacles, women are increasingly successful in breaking through and stepping inside the circle. Particularly in philosophy and cultural theory, an uneasy realization is dawning that man's haphazard mastery of nature has not provided an adequate foundation for a vision worthy of leading us into the next century. Across this bleak and plundered landscape cyberfeminist theorists are emerging, speaking and gathering. A new chain of beings and being in the world is constructed; they reshape each other, they redefine themselves, and they reclaim new electronic technologies for women.

Virtual reality and cyberspace – the technologies for living vicariously. Virtual reality describes a wide range of experiences, including the transformation of two-dimensional objects and spaces through media such as holography, installations which use multiple video monitors or projections to surround the viewer, and the "Hollywood" definition with which we are becoming increasingly familiar – head mounted display, touch sensitive gloves and/or full body suit. Telepresencing and cyberspace, where telecommunications networks enable instantaneous interaction from remote locations, have also been commonly described as virtual spaces.

The body/mind split which has governed our approach to new media, has gone underground, but has not diappeared. The disembodied mind is resurrected through applications such as VR – the desecration of the body has entered a new phase. The proof of the impact of such technologies (which have stretched and twisted our understanding of time and space as well as the limitations of our vulnerable, physical, human bodies) may be measured by the paranoia which they have inspired. Cyberspace has become a fertile breeding ground for multiple personalities, flaming, electronic stalking and gender-bending at the very least.

The body, in virtual space, is no mere user-interface: VR offers the chance to trade-in, remodel, or even leave behind the physical nature with which we are, in reality, burdened. Outside forces which act upon us, impose restrictions, are gone. Gravity and the laws of physics, gone. Entropy and the passage of time become meaningless concepts. Women have always, by virtue or necessity, been adept at free fall, grounding themselves in personal physical experience. This skill will serve well as we venture into other dimensions and back home again. However skilled we become at navigating

these spaces and temporarily leaving our bodies behind, it is doubtful that we will ever achieve immortality. Virtuality is patriarchy's blind spot.

*Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's film about gender, identity and style, documents what was surely (before the introduction of technology-based VR into pop culture), the ultimate virtual experience – walk down a runway, through Harlem, or down Wall Street for that matter, in drag. Transsexual and cross-dressing "walkers," competing in the categories of "executive," "college boy," and "fashion model," recognize that the successful embodiment or representation of stereotypes is measured by both appearance and attitude. "Realness" has always been the unspoken criteria for "passing," and women (those who have avoided being institutionalized for not "fitting in") have become experts at that.

Through Virtual Reality, deconstruction of gender is entering the realm of pop culture, and this link with new electronic technology has implications for the philosophy of cyberfeminism. Technological convergence describes the unification of computers, television and communications technologies. However, convergence describes much more than the evolution towards an environment in which electronic technologies are pervasive. Convergence is happening on more than a technological level – it is happening on a metaphysical level as well. Cultural convergence may be described as the meeting or merging of art and technology. Cyberfeminism is entering an arena in which much more than gender is up for grabs.

Multimedia, interactive video, virtual reality: for women these new technologies present opportunities to break out of prescribed roles and away from scripted dialogues. A rabbit hole through which we may tumble. Our real experiences, when not denied, have been acknowledged only in their immediacy. Our individual histories and the attempt to isolate or remove ourselves from a patriarchal context, have always been undervalued and undermined. We have learned to live from hand to mouth. Transgressing order and linear organization of information, cyberfeminists recognize the opportunity to redefine "reality," on our terms and in our interest, and realize that the electronic communications infrastructure or "matrix" may be the ideal instrument for a new breed of feminists to pick up and play with.



## Notes

1 Gibson, William. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books. p. 25

2 Brand, Stewart (ed.) (1987). *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*. New York: Viking. p. 9

3 Gibson, William. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books. p. 51

4 Kramarae, C. (ed.). *Technology & Women's Voices*. London: Routledge. p. 15

**NANCY PATERSON** is a Toronto-based electronic media artist, Instructor at the Ontario College of Art and Facilities Manager at Charles Street Video. In August 1996 she will premiere an interactive installation titled "The Meadow" at the Siggraph Art Show THE BRIDGE in New Orleans. She is currently working on an installation titled "Stock Market Skirt" in which the hemline of a skirt displayed on a dressmaker's "judy" rises and falls in response to fluctuations in online stock market data.

"Cyberfeminism" was presented at the *Sixth International Symposium on Electronic Art* (Montreal, September 17-24, 1995) on a panel titled "Gender and Technology."