

ISSUE NO. 14

Awkwardness and Assemblage: Digital Schemes for Feminist World-Making

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In this essay, we develop the concept of awkward assemblages to describe feminist digital activism that is multidirectional in its political effects and interpretive legibility, built of uneasy bedfellows and ill-suited coalitional partners. We exemplify the way in which activist practices, developing out of the tensions in which contemporary feminisms find themselves, complicate the genealogy of feminist protest. We focus on feminist responses triggered by the sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve 2015/16, particularly the work of Swiss-German performance artist Milo Moiré. This example allows us to highlight the complex ways in which local and contemporary feminist interventions intersect with the history of feminist protest art and how they link to transnational movements—among other examples, the #MeToo movement. We then turn to digital-feminist coalitional possibilities by thinking through assembling, along with coding and hacking, as performative labor that emphasizes the potential of inventing and visualizing political forms that (however awkwardly) materialize different worlds.

In our 2016 coauthored book, *Awkward Politics*, we describe awkwardness as inherent to popular forms of feminism that produce slippery, often circular, political meaning. The result is discomfort or disorientation, a sense that is replicated in the aesthetics of the popfeminist object or performance. Troubling tensions arise for feminisms between failure and success, affirmation and refusal, or doing and undoing. Channeling Donna Haraway's recent book, we call for *Staying with the Trouble* in which feminisms find

themselves by experiencing and interrogating awkwardness as a mode of politics, instead of avoiding or explaining it away with easy interpretations or quick solutions.

Building on this previous work, in this essay we suggest that in intersectional digital communities, awkwardness takes trouble and turns it into visual, situational, and material artistic practice. The resulting aesthetic dimensions of this troubled practice are, like awkwardness itself, multidirectional in their political target and interpretive legibility and often built of uneasy bedfellows or ill-suited coalitional partners; they are awkward assemblages. This very act of assembling and reassembling becomes a form of world-making, which is the mark of other digital feminist work such as hacking and coding. Instead of examining the awkward assemblage as a completed artwork and therefore interpretable as a form of feminist-political representation, we suggest thinking through the 'performative materiality' (Drucker) of troubled practice in digital media. Thus, the world made reveals itself to be as awkward in its political meaning as the materials, discourses, and intentions of the assemblage itself; this world forms the basis for a discomfiting activism.

In order to exemplify the way in which such troubled practices and awkward assemblages complicate the genealogy of feminist protest and intensify long-standing political feminist interventions, we set the stage in the first section by focusing on activist responses triggered by the sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve 2015/16, particularly those of the Swiss-German performance artist Milo Moiré. We then read these discussions very generally within the context of transnational, digital, feminist activism and more specifically, the context of the #MeToo movement that was rapidly gaining ground since 2017. These very different feminist media events highlight the multidirectional political effects of feminist digital craft. In the second part of our essay, we turn to digital-feminist coalitional possibilities by thinking through assembling, along with coding and hacking, as performative labor that emphasizes the potential of inventing and visualizing political forms that (however awkwardly) materialize alternative worlds.

Awkward Assemblages and Troubled Practices: From Moiré to #MeToo

During the New Year's Eve celebrations 2015/16, men in groups of 9 to 100 sexually assaulted hundreds of women in front of the Cologne train station. The assaults were first reported on Twitter and not confirmed by the mainstream press until January fifth (Weber 189–202), at which time the police identified the perpetrators to be of 'Arab'

descent. During a news **conference** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRzfSx-I-3o>) a few days later in a stunning public display of victim blaming, the Cologne mayor suggested that women should remain ‘eine Armlänge’ (at one arm’s length) from strangers at all times. The social media reaction was swift. In Germany, voices spoke out against a culture that made the violence possible, first under the hashtag #einearmlaenge. The tweets and memes collected under that hashtag highlight with historically complicated humor the ridiculousness of the mayor’s suggestion; references to the Hitler salute abounded. The racialized vitriol in the name of feminism and the protection of women unleashed by Cologne in social media and the mainstream news alike remained unsettling. The magazine *Focus* from January eighth responded to the events with a cover depicting a naked, white woman covered in black handprints; the title page of that weekend’s edition of the newspaper the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* showed a drawing of the legs of a white woman with a black hand at her crotch. The naked body of the woman (white, German, presumably middleclass) stands in contrast to the implied clothed body of the man (brown, Muslim, refugee, precarious); accompanying both is the imagined veiled body of the Muslim woman (perceived repressed). The #ausnahmslos (literally ‘without exception,’ meaning to call out sexism and violence against women in all parts of society, without making exceptions), initiated by journalist Kübra Gümüşay and digital activist Anne Wizorek among others, quickly replaced #einearmlaenge and condemned both the sexism and the racism unfolding in the aftermath of these assaults.

Within the troubling and troubled medial responses to the Cologne assaults, practices emerge that exceed the ‘geopolitical and epistemological boundaries’ (Greyser and Puar 842) of violence, not only that committed on New Year’s Eve, but also the violence of the ensuing reactions. Awkwardness appears here, assembles. Assemblages are ‘a collection of things, a combination of items and the fact of assembling,’ interesting less for what they are than what they do (Puar, “I would rather be a Cyborg” 57). Central to our reading of Jasbir Puar’s approach to assemblage is how it is placed in conversation with intersectional analyses, not only Kimberlé Crenshaw’s own foundational and more recent work, but also the work of scholars such as Patricia Hill-Collins or Sirma Bilge, whose intersectional analyses in a broad variety of academic fields have redefined feminist thought, theory, and activism. In Puar’s development of a productive interchange between intersectionality and assemblage, ‘[c]ategories—race, gender, sexuality—are considered events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects. [...] Assemblages foreground [...] the eventness of identity’ (58). Assemblage does not replace the necessity to think intersectionally, but the term helps us to describe the way in which intersectionality

functions as a process—as part of the unfolding of an event. This is particularly apparent in the digital realm, where identity is always a highly contested and ongoing event, shifting in relation to multiple contexts. The body is simultaneously present on the street and in an image, maybe assembling with other bodies in protest and assembled with other images or words by hashtags. If the materiality of digital media is to be considered performative, how this material assembles around identity on- and offline must always be situated within intersectional categories. Thinking about assemblage offers us a way to critically analyze the emerging aesthetic forms of digital activist world-making, particularly for what they do to intersections of race, gender, or sexuality.

Much has been written on the implications for anti-racist activism and feminisms in contemporary Germany (McCarthy; Plumly 163–88; Weber 189–202) in the aftermath of the New Year’s Eve attacks. Scholars, journalists, and activists not only responded to the attacks themselves, but also to the media responses to these attacks. The awkward assemblage of the digitally disseminated creative responses to this violence offer glimpses into what is at stake, politically, in these implications, not only for Germany. One such creative response comes from the Swiss-German artist Milo Moiré, whose protest pieces specifically address the assaults in Cologne, in both intent and content, and tap into a longer history of female nudity in protest including the more recent FEMEN protests we discuss in *Awkward Politics*. Further, while enacted both live and virtually disseminated, her works specifically target digital media in their critique. The ‘Mirror Box’ from 2016/17 serves as one example. In it, Moiré restages Austrian performance artist Valie Export’s 1968 ‘Tapp- und Tastkino’ (Tap and Touch Cinema) as a comment on consent after Cologne. In the **original piece**

(<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/werke/tapp-und-tastkino/video/1/>) , Export, wearing a Styrofoam box with curtains around her upper body, invites ‘viewers’ on the streets of Vienna to reach in and feel her naked breasts, documenting the performance on camera. In Moiré’s interpretation, the curtains are made of red velvet and the box is made of mirrors with embedded recording cameras. Further, whereas Export’s performance was restricted to her breasts, Moiré offers two different versions: the ‘Bosom-Box’ and the ‘Vagina-Box.’ On her English-language website, Moiré describes the ‘**Mirror Box**’ (<https://milomoire.com/en/mirror-box/>)’ as a ‘mirror of consent’: ‘Mirror Box is a societal reflection of human sexuality. What happens when a woman puts her sexuality on public display, assertively takes the initiative and lays out clear rules for the intimate interaction?’ The camera affixed to the inside of the box offers an awkward answer to this question. In the performance **video** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTmfbr6cCTU>) ON

YouTube, we see hands, fingering Moiré's vagina. The video has been censored with an overlaid ubiquitous black bar, rendering it pornographic—a visual marker placing it within the context of other soft-porn videos on this and other streaming channels. This visual display of the interaction of bodies is intercut with close-up views of the artist's face, visibly performing the enjoyment of the touch. While, as the stated starting point for the performance, touch is invited and consensual, the public fingering of Moiré's vagina in a box nonetheless alludes to porn booths, objectification of women's bodies on display or for sale, and unwanted public touch without explicitly thematizing these references. Further, its digital representation on YouTube undermines the assertion that the performer maintains control over the 'rules' of the intimate interaction that Moiré lays out. The critique of sexual objectification is thereby blurred and a critical discussion of consent potentially undermined.

Moiré positions her work specifically as a commentary on the transformation of the self in the digital sphere. The video's accompanying description on her website and YouTube states: 'The audience's reflection on the mirrored box simultaneously becomes a visual metaphor for the role reversal from voyeur to the object of view: a constant play of inversions analogous to our roles in the digital world.' As the piece is intended as a response to Cologne, this statement suggests that the digital sphere in essence transforms women into objects of sexual assault. The digital medium becomes part and parcel of Moiré's feminist-performative critique, but it also enables that critique by adding to the flow of sexual content on the Internet. Underscoring this paradox, on her parallel site, *unlimitedmuse.com*, uncensored versions of this and other pieces may be viewed for a small fee. On the one hand, it could be argued that Moiré takes control, in a feminist-entrepreneurial manner, of the circulation of pornographic imagery and commodification of women online, pocketing the sales as artist-actor-business woman. On the other hand, however, because the video replicates the version shown for free on YouTube, including the accompanying activist text, but removes the black bar, the question as to whether the uncensored video serves politics or (sexual and financial) pleasure goes unanswered.

Delineating a clear take on feminist politics, consent, and digital selfhood in this piece is problematic while circuitous. In a 30 June 2017 blog post, Sara Ahmed unfolds a meditation on the word 'No,' framing no within the cases of rape and sexual violence condoned by institutional structures and the conversations around consent culture: 'No can be heard as inciting violence. [...] We need to hear the violence that converts no into yes. [...] Each time you say *no*, you have to be prepared for an increase in the

intensity of the violence' (emphasis in original). Rather than making audible the violence that turns no to yes, Moiré's piece visualized the process of turning yes into a no, a feminist rejection of the material act, its display, and its digital dissemination. While the stated intention is to read the artist as setting the rules for the interaction, the interaction that takes place (literally) mirrors assault, where the female body is touched in intimate and sexualized ways, in public spaces, by strangers, and on display. The watching audience is also reflected back in the mirrors; they are like the Internet user, with their fingers on the mouse, hovering over the link to the uncensored video. The performance, which is explicitly coded and marketed as a protest against sexual violence, is infused with imagery of sexual pleasure from the side of the observer, thereby perpetuating the violence against women in porn imagery flooding digital (and non-digital) platforms. The affirmative gesture towards sexualized touch stands in tension with the need to refuse (*no!*) forms of objectification as feminist resistance. Moiré's performance thus circumscribes a back-and-forth motion between the no and yes, visualizing the moment it becomes acceptable to intimately touch the woman's body and simultaneously hinting at the tipping point when it is no longer acceptable, while also taking both moments to the level of ongoing, durational practice. The implication referring to the virtual world in her discursive framing of the project on both of her websites is that society renders and accepts the conversion from no to yes as described by Ahmed as always automatic.

The materiality of these performances must also be examined through an intersectional lens. Moiré's white, naked, conventionally beautiful, and cosmetically enhanced body is assembled with the discourses around racism and sexism in German public perception. The body of the artist is rendered almost non-human while it is pornographically hyper-physical in its presence. This is precisely what makes Moiré's performances problematic *and* productive for feminisms as it forces the question of who permits touch by whom, who accuses, and who is heard; of who can afford to own the yes and who insists on the no. Moiré's display is infused with normative notions of gender, sexuality, and desirability, with the power of certain images—in this case of the white, young, and conventionally beautiful female body in the European, urban public sphere—to appear 'in control' of perception, reception, and touch. Moiré's display thus highlights the way in which women's bodies are rendered 'differentially vulnerable to social [and sexual] violence' (Butler, "Rethinking" 12), depending on racializations, social class, religious orientation, and age. It is in our impulse of rejection of her art as feminist that we face the political interventions it makes.

When we consider Moiré's work in the context of other political, feminist movements and discourses that become part of its assemblage, we can uncover the kinds of interventions that become possible. Performances such as Moiré's and international campaigns against sexual harassment such as the prolific #MeToo intersect in the same political space, however, in the latter, the motion between affirmation and refusal, between yes and no, works differently. In the #MeToo campaign, a hashtag that built on African-American social activist Tarana Burke's long use of the keyword 'me too' and that went viral in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein accusation, no continues to mean refusal and dissent. This is not a solitary act of defiance, but rather a collaborative action of solidarity. To refuse to stay silent about sexual harassment becomes a participatory gesture that affirms a sense of community when women share their stories, in 'emotional narration[s]' (Gerbaudo 162) on social media and link them through hashtags. Such forms of refusal are never just refusal; they engender a utopian moment as messy and diffuse aesthetic forms filled with trauma and loneliness as well as collaborative resistance. However, while #MeToo is based on the work of a black female activist and meant to emphasize shared experiences of women (and men) from all social and economic spheres, the fact that it went viral in the wake of the accusations against Harvey Weinstein by, mostly white, famous actresses, again, highlights the privileged position some people have over others.

We describe a similar dynamic in our discussion of Moiré's work in the context of the Cologne assaults and their aftermath: Opting into the collective activist moment of resistance is not an option for all; some cannot afford to call out, for others, calling out goes unnoticed. A Muslim-identified woman or a WoC doing the same kind of performance in European cities would have elicited completely different responses—possibly backfiring by triggering racist-sexist responses and putting the artist in physical danger. This thought-experiment calls into discussion questions of racialization, hyper-sexualization, and violence when it comes to the question of public pleasure and consent in a completely different way; it demands an acknowledgement that 'public,' including social media, is not an equitable space. In its response to the Cologne violence and the ensuing media coverage, #ausnahmslos did offer an attempt to bring particularly race into the discussion by reassembling the way in which the attacks were read and understood by feminist communities; it called for what one could read as a truly intersectional #MeToo movement. The challenges expressed in #ausnahmslos and, most recently, in a new hashtag that emerged in Germany, #MeTwo, a campaign to specifically draw attention to the experiences of micro-aggression and every-day racisms by immigrants and refugees in Germany (Şahin), ask us to

continually reformulate the ways in which we think, speak, and do feminism. They reassemble the material of feminist activism in a way that emphasizes that different bodies are differently vulnerable to violence and the power to lay out the rules is unequally distributed.

The Labor of World-Making: Coding, Hacking, and Assembling in the Awkward Mode

As our reading of Moiré's work in the context of the Cologne attacks and feminist hashtag activism illustrates, awkward assemblages—and the gaps they create—uncover ways in which activism can perpetuate or play into social, sexual, and racial exclusion, in some cases creating dissonant alliances. But as we think through the awkward assemblages emerging from the troubled practice of affirmation and refusal, of hashtags responding to hashtags, we also see the potential for realizing the 'more modest possibilities of partial recuperations and getting on together' (Haraway 10). One way of thinking about 'getting on together' as digital circulation and feminist-activist response is the notion of 'performative materiality,' a term conceived by Johanna Drucker to emphasize the multidirectional 'production of work as an interpretative event' in digital media. The event 'provoked by a material substrate is always situated within historical and cultural circumstances and particulars and expresses ideology at every level of production, consumption, implementation and design.' In Moiré's 'Mirror Box,' the performative materiality of the work does not merely designate the laboring body of the self-described 'artist,' but also the manner in which the work done in the digital sphere, along with the work of the platform and its implied counterparts—from YouTube to YouPorn—and the commenting public, all leave material traces that are to be read as events or processes for feminist interpretation and community building.

Beyond creating and using hashtags and performing, circulating, and sharing feminist performance art and activism, coding and hacking are two modes of creative feminist assemblage that emphasize agency and action as well as the materiality and the communal nature of the digital: knitting the pink pussy hat for the Women's March on Washington a day after Donald Trump's inauguration is an act of coding that relies on digital dissemination; feminist hackerspaces such as Double Union in San Francisco or Attic in Seattle focus equally on the creation of digital codes as well as crafting material objects in community workshops. Emphasizing the 'production of work' keys the focus toward digital feminist processes, including strategies of disturbance, deferral, disappearance, deceleration, and acceleration, rooted in a digital sphere made up of

competing cultures, ideologies, and histories of violence and trauma, but also of recuperation and conviviality.

If we apply this digital feminist reading of performative materiality to awkward assemblages and the troubled practices that create them, the very act of assembling (and reassembling) describes a further form of digital feminist work that functions much like coding and hacking. We draw here on Judith Butler's core thesis in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, in which she suggests that 'acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political' (9). Butler focuses on the manner in which in the act of assembly (vigils, protests, demonstrations), bodies become indexes of precarity by themselves embodying the very conditions the assembly is protesting. The assembly is to be read as 'political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics' (18). Butler's focus remains at street-level as public space. However, digital platforms also constitute public spaces where we act in concert. Paolo Gerbaudo links the process that takes place between digital and public spaces by describing the 'mediation of physical assembling through the notion of a *choreography of assembly*' (21; emphasis in original). While never totally spontaneous, but also without formal organizational structure, assembly and the creation of assemblages on and through these digital platforms become politically powerful performances of lives lived precariously across geopolitical and temporal divides (Gerbaudo 21). Digital assemblies are a form of collective activist work, a process of making visible with the intention to change material conditions and make more livable worlds. The act of digitally assembling—along with coding and hacking—is thus craft that must be interpreted for its material production. These kinds of assemblies are not organizations or movements with clearly defined sets of demands; they also do not signify a feminist utopia; rather, one might describe them as spaces of messy potential for imagining and materializing differently, whether we are speaking of objects, systems, programs, or worlds. Rather than just insisting on the power of the image or the importance of representations, a focus on assembly stresses the process of making images, of changing contexts, and shifting realities. Reading for assemblages means asking what and who makes things, bodies, or images move and examining why and under what conditions they assemble and reassemble.

Assembly thus also describes the process of crafting communities of protest that link the street to the net. Hashtags gather tweets, metadata connects different texts and images in search results, and followers form digital alliances. Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, and tumblr feeds and live video streams from media organs as well as from individuals on the ground using apps such as Periscope all join in, connected by event pages. Further, digital presences of mainstream news media aggregate the images in a type of data visualization of feminist protest. The international deluge of images is curated differently according to the algorithm on the account holder's page; images and stories repeat themselves in heaps and piles of data, interrupted by the odd unrelated post. Traditional models of participatory politics and solidarity are mobilized through shares of interests, images, stories, and anger. This sharing may get lost, go unnoticed, or go viral. Puar outlines how virality points simultaneously to 'speed and reach of information transit, especially in relation to the Internet as well as to bodily contamination, uncontainability, unwelcome transgression of border and boundaries while pointing more positively to the porosity, indeed the conviviality, of what has been treated as opposed' ("Homonationalism as Assemblage" 42). International networks created through virality thus take on the feeling of being an entirely spontaneous groundswell, but they are also suspect in their broad communication of solidarity. The location of the viral is the body, for it is an infection that connects all bodies. Whether we like each other or not, in the viral moment we must get on together. The virality pushes assembly into the awkward mode.

These connections describe feminist receptions of Moiré's art as always uncomfortable, wrong, and awkward, but also as part of a communal assembly that refuses, rejects, and reassembles. Feminist campaigns such as #MeToo make the violence that converts no into yes, palpable and emphasize collective experiences and different voices and agencies. Thought through in this way, the discomfort of Moiré's performances and the solidarities that form through #MeToo make awkward sense together; they collect and hold the dissonance. Moiré, by explicitly 'asking for it,' adds her voice to campaigns against assault push back against victim blaming; with its viral motion of assembly, #MeToo recodes and hacks into the meaning that Moiré's performance and its digital dissemination create.

Taking a closer look at what world this work of getting on together might build highlights the urgency of making the very act of creation itself a feminist, anti-racist, crip, or queer act. In an interview addressing the notion of the contemporary, artist-activist Hito Steyerl calls for work that makes present and 'materialize[s] a different world' ('What is Contemporary?'). In these emerging worlds, power structures and ideologies clash awkwardly. It is within these awkward clashes that aesthetic practices recode and reinvent political meanings. Lauren Berlant describes such aesthetic

practices as aiming to ‘produce some better ways of mediating the sense of [this] historical moment [...] so that it would be possible to imagine a potentialized present that does not reproduce all of the conventional collateral damage’ (263). This might be a world where nobody has to say ‘me too’ (to echo the conclusion of Oprah Winfrey’s **speech** (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/08/entertainment/oprah-globes-speech-transcript/index.html>) at the Golden Globes Awards 2018) or tweet under #MeTwo, where the awkwardness of a performance such as Moiré’s ‘Mirror Box’ does *not* perpetuate the very violence it claims to critique and where the *resistance* against racist violence becomes a viral movement. #ausnahmslos and #MeTwo do not allow public discourse to ignore the racism intertwined with sexist violence. Along with the complex implications raised by Moiré’s work, they continually reiterate the importance of asking uncomfortable questions about sexual touch, sexist violence, and power. We thus start our critical reflection with a discussion of the collateral damage of acts of sexual assault, highlighted, repeated, or exaggerated, but we end with a hopeful tone that emphasizes the process and the potential of inventing and visualizing political forms that (however awkwardly) assemble and materialize different worlds.

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—CITATION—

Smith, Carrie & Stehle, Maria (2018). "Awkwardness and Assemblage: Digital Schemes for Feminist World-Making." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No. 14. 10.5399/uo/ada.2018.14.3



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◀ #METOO ◀ AWKWARDNESS ◀ FEMINIST ACTIVISM ◀ MILO MOIRÉ ◀ PEER REVIEWED
◀ PERFORMANCE

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Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology
ISSN 2325-0496