

6-14-1998

Chik Tek Symposium Revisited

Helen Wood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch>

Archived from http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=224.html. Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at <https://github.com/NickSzydowski/switch>.

Recommended Citation

Wood, Helen (1998) "Chik Tek Symposium Revisited," *SWITCH*: Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol9/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SWITCH by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.



ELECTRONIC GENDER

Chik Tek Symposium Revisited

Helen Wood on Jun 14 1998

issue 09

Interviews with Women Artists Using Technology

The **Chik Tek** symposium in November 1997 at the San Jose Museum of Art, was a two day gathering of women using technology in both art and industry. Women shared their work and ideas in a forum of dynamic presentations and panel discussions. Seven months later, I decided to follow through on questions I had at the symposium by interviewing some of the participants.

The title of the conference was controversial. The title was a label overarching this gathering of women thinkers. What was this fragment of ideology doing here? Was it meant to be a parody or straight? What did it signify? I felt that the title was standing smug and slightly out of reach, and I wanted to grab it, challenge it and make it accountable in the arena of opinions. What did it say about us, and what did we have to say about it? A question for the women interviewed was "how do you feel about the title of the Chik Tek symposium, and what do you think of the word 'chick'?"

Another question I wanted to hear a discussion about was why was this a conference for women only? Was segregation helpful and why? What was going on about this? My question was, "Do you feel that a symposium for women in technology is useful as opposed to a mixed gender symposium?"

A number of women artists from the Chik Tek symposium had their work in the Chik Tek 97 exhibition at the Art Tech Gallery in San Jose, with a catalog. Concurrently with this exhibition was a show at the San Jose Museum of Art, called "Alternating Currents: American Art in the Age of Technology, selections from the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art," where a mere three out of approximately thirty-three artists were women. My question was, "What are your comments about the separation of gender in the art hierarchy?"

The interviews were by phone and the responses were reconstructed from handwritten notes. I tried to catch the sentences verbatim, and I hope that I have cleanly caught the ideas of the person being interviewed. Some ideas were reordered to make them flow better.

Artist interviews follow:

- Lisa Milosevich
- Tamiko Thiel
- Geri Wittig
- Lynn Hershman
- Lisa Jevbratt
- Diane Fenster
- Monica Lam
- E.G. Crichton

Lisa Milosevich

bio

Lisa started off in the art world as a photographer, which led into commercial photography, graphics arts and now 14 years later she is doing web design and authoring for a large software company. In graduate school at San Jose State University, Lisa had the idea of documenting women who were working in and with technology to get the pulse of what was really happening, and to find out with a disregard to statistics how strong women were and where they were heading, and to see in what way technology was being affected and how it would affect people in the future. Thus was born the idea for the

Chik Tek conference, which Lisa put together and directed. She has produced a cd-rom of the Chik Tek conference, and if you are interested in it, please contact Lisa at lmilosev@adobe.com

thoughts

I have no problem with the name of the conference. The name was a joke, akin to Web Grrls. Women can call themselves what they want. We need a sense of humor about these things. The connotations of younger women calling themselves "chick" is different than 20 years ago. Women nowadays are brought up with a lot more freedom. Whether women liked the title or not is very generational. Younger women are so accustomed to seeing campy names, they don't even blink an eye. Women in their 40's would find it much more insulting.

The word "chick" is a slang term for young woman, and though it can be derogatory or positive, it is pretty neutral. It doesn't come with any value to it one way or another. I was worried that Chik Tek was going to sound fluffy, and not serious enough, but we got the funding we were seeking for the conference. "Chick" is slang and neutral, and "tech" sounds hard and mechanical, so they seem opposite to each other, but together they add up to something more.

A symposium just for women is useful. It was good to take a poll, how are women influencing technology? How do they feel? The idea was for women to walk away feeling empowered and inspired, in a way that one might not get from a mixed gender symposium. I'm not pro-segregation, but it is interesting to see how women are involved with technology from a sociological standpoint. I think there is a myth that there are not a lot of women in technology. For example, at a Photoshop conference, most of the speakers might be men even when there are more and more women using Photoshop. But they are not the ones getting up there, they are not front and center. The Chik Tek conference allowed women to show off what they are doing. It didn't turn into a discussion about women's issues -- that wasn't the point. The point was to talk about what women were doing and to provide a showcase for them.

An important aspect of the conference was that there was a wide variety of ages and viewpoints. It was valuable to see what different people had to say on the subject. For example, Margaret Morse said that some of her chief role models are women that are younger than her. Sarah Allen said that when they are interviewing people for a job, there will be 15 men for every 5 women, and that the 5 women have to be good because there are less of them.

The fact that the Alternating Currents show was dominated by men is unfortunate. It shows a lack of research on the part of the Whitney. They are leaving out the women pioneers. Historically women have gotten less coverage, and it is slowly changing. For example, Lynn Hershman's work is grand and thought provoking. She is very well known. Why isn't she getting spreads in Time magazine?

Tamiko Thiel

bio

Tamiko Thiel, currently living in San Francisco, studied Product Design Engineering at Stanford University, human-machine interface design at MIT's Media Lab and Biomechanics Lab, and fine art with an emphasis in installation and video art at the Academy of Fine Art in Munich, Germany. She utilizes this background to explore the sensuality of the machine and technology as a vehicle for human fantasy. She has exhibited her video art in the US, Japan and Europe. She was creative director and producer of Starbright World, a virtual reality playspace for seriously ill children, has taught design theory at Carnegie Mellon University and directed the industrial and packaging design of a series of massively parallel supercomputers, the Connection Machines CM-1 and CM-2, at Thinking Machines Corporation. Currently she is working on art projects using virtual reality, and has received a grant from Wired Magazine and the Asian American Arts Foundation (AAAF) for research and creation of an initial

prototype. A description of the project is at: <http://mission.base.com/tamiko>.

thoughts

When I was getting into the engineering profession in the late 70's, women felt like they had to hide their gender in order to dress for success. They wore skirted suits that were female but not sexy, the styles were frumpy. The idea was to try to make women look serious. But it was also restricting, that to be taken seriously you had to act sexless and genderless.

At various points in my personal development of life and career, I ran into women that were cool, chic, elegant, competent, with a very feminine and commanding presence. On the basis of these role models, I realized we could have it all, we could be respected for our technical talent and didn't have to give up our sexuality. Personally I haven't had a problem being a woman in engineering.

In discussing the title of the symposium "Chik Tek" I was all for it. It conveys a sassiness that I really enjoy. Younger women today feel less inhibited, feel they can be sexy, sassy and also be treated as intelligent and competent. This is because of the pioneering work done by older women. We don't want to be eunuchs.

In repossessing words we can change the meaning, to not allow society to define the scope of the word. In taking over the word "chick," we can define it to mean both powerful and sexy. I don't think the word has been redefined, though. A cool guy is a "dude". What is the equivalent for women? What do you call a cool girl?

It was good to have a symposium that focuses on women. There are plenty of mixed gender symposiums. It was interesting for me to go to Chik Tek and to talk to women involved with technology in different ways, to bathe in the atmosphere.

Regarding the Alternating Currents show, it's obvious that groups go for their own values. This is also true if you have only women defining who the great artists are. What we need is diversity in the ranks of those doing the defining, to include different value systems. Whether it's black american, asian american, or european american, you can't expect a single homogenous group to be able to represent all viewpoints.

I'm not sure if technology is changing the status of women or of if there is a parallel development happening at the same time. Technology, by providing more opportunities, allows women to compete on an equal level with men. It helps them switch from blue collar work to white collar work in many but not all countries. Women can compete on an equal basis with men on more vital and higher economic levels.

Technology is very enabling for women. I have the impression that more women are exhibited world wide in new media than in the traditional art world. If this is true, could it be because it is a smaller pool that people can't afford to ignore, or because the value system of people involved in new media is different than the value system of people in traditional mediums? A difference in mentality produces new media.

Gerri Wittig

bio

Gerri Wittig received her MFA in Computers in Fine Art from the CADRE Institute of the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University. Working primarily with installation and the Web, her work focuses on social and political aspects of computer mediated communications technology. Her work for the Chik Tek 97 exhibition, "HomeNet: Home Entertainment and Surveillance Center -- Better Living through Networking", is a Web installation which juxtaposes voyeuristic and exhibitionistic qualities of the Web.

thoughts

The title "Chik Tek" was suggested for the symposium by me in an informal, joking sort of way, it was really just an off-handed kind of joke. Now I am not sure about the title. It was appropriate in some ways. It acted on the queer nation model, which is taking a derogatory term as one's own -- by owning it, it becomes empowered. It also has an alliance with the girl power movement. Empowering the term "girl" or "chick," becomes part of the young hip vernacular, though I haven't seen the word "chick" used in the girl power movement.

The problem now is that it alludes to the third wave of the post-feminist movement and to aspects of girl power, and mapping out our spaces within that movement. I don't think that happened at the Chik Tek conference. I don't think the girl power movement was represented or addressed. At feminist taxonomy sites, girl power doesn't even get listed, but it's definitely a presence on the web.

I think there's a certain sense of power we have as children that's affected or maybe even lost when our sexual identities begin to emerge. Before we hit adolescence we're usually less identified with our sexuality and the confusion and insecurities emerging sexual identities bring; we're more at ease with ourselves on that level. When you hit adolescence, the self-esteem issues hit, regarding what you should be in terms of being a female. I think an aspect of girl power is reclaiming the power and sense of well being you had as a girl and not having to conform to stereotypes that compromise self-esteem.

In 1998 we are at a historical point, we find ourselves with a multiplicity of feminisms, and a complex post-modern relationship with feminism. This is important to look at and I don't think it was addressed at the conference. There wasn't a discussion of the first, second and third waves of feminism, and asking the question, "where are we now?" This wasn't visible to me. Where are we now? I assumed that we were feminists. Are we feminists?

There could have been men at the conference. When we started "Act Up," the AIDS activist group, in San Jose, there was a heterosexual woman, a heterosexual man, several gay men, and a transsexual - a man in the process of becoming a woman. It was a very eclectic mix, but the point was that we were all queer identified. Similarly at the Chik Tek conference, it would have been good to have had men involved that were feminist identified.

I don't think segregation is necessary in the day-to-day environment that we live in today. I think where it's useful is when the culture is so oppressive, that oppressed members gain power by creating a segregated community from which to build and gain ground first, as happened in earlier feminist movements. I think it's important however for that structure to evolve and move out into the larger culture, as social progress is made. I think to a large extent we've gotten past that point in many areas of the physical reality culture, but to some extent I think it's still necessary in cyberspace. In cyberspace I think it's still useful for women to segregate in certain arenas in order to create a presence for themselves, as it's a relatively new space of cultural production.

Technology is a leveling tool. It depends on the field, though. In art the leveling is much more apparent than in engineering. For people of my generation we've had to learn the technology as a second language, we came to it after childhood and adolescence. But for a young person, it is part of their literacy, like a language. It is so much more a part of the way they are structured.

Lynn Hershman

bio

Lynn Hershman has worked for the past 30 years in photography, site-specific public art, and video. She is credited as the first artist to create an interactive art videodisk, entitled Lorna, (1979-83). Her 51 videotapes and 4 interactive installations have received many international awards. In 1994, she was the first woman to receive a tribute and retrospective at the San Francisco International Film Festival. She received the German ZKM/Seimens Media Arts Award alongside director Peter Greenaway and theorist Jean Baudrillard. Lynn Hershman is currently a professor at the University of California, Davis where she teaches electronic arts and is the founder of the IDEA Media Lab.

thoughts

A symposium just for women is good, and can be more intimate and helpful. Women tend to help each other more. A mixed gender symposium could be more informative and broader ranging in scope, for example men are usually CEOs, there are not a lot of women in powerful positions.

The symposium was a good beginning. It has to go further. The ideas are right, but it needs more refinement. There was no follow up to the symposium, there could have been ongoing dialogues on line.

I really hated the title. I felt it was degrading, because it relived bad stereotypes. Calling women "chicks" is negative, and calling them "techs" is too. Techs are assumed to be non-thinkers, just technicians. It needed something more dignified, something that conveyed that women understand technology on a conceptual level.

The separation of gender in the art hierarchy is terrible. I've just had two shows in San Francisco, and neither were reviewed. I'm fairly well known in Europe, but in the U.S. I can't get shows. I feel like I am being excluded constantly. My work wasn't in the Alternating Currents show. It would be good if there was a more effective way to

monitor museums' discrimination.

Lisa Jevbratt

bio

Lisa Jevbratt designs and programs art systems that participates in, feeds off and comments on the processes of change resulting from the development of information/communication technologies. Lisa was born in Sweden, she studied at Malmö School of Fine Arts - Forum in Sweden, she is an internationally exhibited artist, and has recently graduated with an MFA from San Jose State University's CADRE Institute.

thoughts

The title is obviously problematic. Using the word "chick" basically comes down to a humor that I don't think is funny. However, I almost like the title because it almost makes fun of the symposium. It says something about how the symposium was problematic.

I don't think that a symposium just for women in technology is useful. Information technology is forcing us to redefine roles and what it means to be human. The changes are more fundamental than how women can change their so-called experiences as women. It's even more strange for artists working in technology to have a gender based event, than another medium such as painting, because the development of technology is bringing on changes of what it means to be human. We have to see that in part technology controls us, and we have to follow. To take advantage of it, we have to give in. So by having a symposium where everyone is trying to manifest the differences between men and women in a superficial way, it stops the possibilities of what could be very important with new technologies for women and men. I heard a lot of sexist comments in the symposium, like the idea that women have more common sense, that illogical thinking is "feminine," and that women are connected to an essence of life.

Regarding the Alternating Currents show: We live in a male dominated culture. By continually confirming that women have more common sense, or that men are more logical, it will never change. It is putting ourselves down, and not the right way of fighting the obvious fact that society is male dominated. The right way of fighting it is explicitly refusing to submit to the predefined roles of what men and women are, and I feel like I'm doing that in my work all the time. When you work with information technology as an art medium, you have a good chance to investigate how we are changing. By working with it, I participate actively in the processes that are redefining us.

I participated in the symposium because I wanted to be in on the discussion. I had a chance to jump in and express these views. It's good to get another opportunity to discuss these things.

Diane Fenster

bio

Diane Fenster is an internationally exhibited digital artist. Her work has been called an important voice in the development of a true digital aesthetic. She views herself as an alchemist, using digital tools to delve into fundamental human issues. Her work is literary and emotional, full of symbolism and multiple layers of meaning. The tradition of the Surrealist cut-up is evident in her formal concerns. Fenster's work marries evocative and fragmented imagery, taken from the artist's photography. Her images appear in numerous publications and CD's on digital art including the Aperture monograph "Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age" and her work appears on the Zonezero photography website curated by Pedro Meyer. She is a guest lecturer at many seminars and conferences. Her work has been exhibited at the SIGGRAPH 95 and SIGGRAPH97 fine art shows and is part of museum and corporate private collections.

thoughts

I would have preferred a mixed gender symposium. I understand that having a women only symposium is to further women, but it is like a special olympics, like a handicap. I see everyone working equally. We are stronger and can get a lot further by everyone working together.

I would like to encourage more women to consider using and working with technology in their work. I do **illustration** as well as fine art, and I did a presentation for "The Alternative Pick," which is an illustration and photography source book. A woman came up and thanked me for being a woman who used technology in her work. She described a situation in her school in the computers in art department, which was dominated by men. The men had the power, and had access to "technological information" because they knew the "numbers" but not necessarily the spirit.

I would like women to come to understand that technology can be used to describe things beyond technology, that it is a tool to describe emotion, a tool in art for personal exploration. I'd like to see more of a balance going on.

The title "Chik Tek" was counterproductive. I understand it was coined as a joke. I don't think it bears commenting on.

Monica Lam

bio

Monica Lam is a filmmaker who works in experimental and documentary digital video. On exhibit currently is a multimedia installation at the New Langton Arts Gallery in San Francisco which combines a 3-screen image display with digital photography; the piece is an advertising campaign for an imaginary product "Dai Wu," a drink that provides instant enlightenment. Monica recently completed a 1-1/2 year project as researcher and cinematographer on a PBS series "In Search of Law and Order" about juvenile justice in the U.S., which broadcast nationally this past April 98. Her current video projects include working as an associate producer for "Citizen Hong Kong" a documentary about 4 people growing up in post-handover Hong Kong, and directing "Becoming Mr. Asian" a documentary about San Francisco's first Asian male beauty pageant. The piece which she exhibited at Chik Tek 97 at the Art Tech gallery was a video piece called "Sex and Zen," a series of 6 shorts about contemporary Hong Kong culture and technology.

thoughts

The word "chick" is a funny term. I like it, it's cool. It depends upon the context, but it can be used in a way that implies a certain kind of casual toughness. The voice saying the word is so important. A woman using "girl" or "girlfriend" establishes an immediate casual bond. A man using "girl" doesn't work for me -- I'm not a girl anymore. Surfer girls are "chicks" -- and in that context it means cool, fastpaced and light-hearted. When paired with the word "tech," it sounds like another language, becomes truncated and abstract in an interesting way, and there are less implications than when either word is mentioned alone.

A symposium just for women in technology was useful. I got to meet other women artists, it was a chance to network. A good thing was that gender was not massively in the forefront. The work was not clouded or pushed aside. Gender was just one of the reasons for getting together. It was useful because we are still in a world where both technological industry and the art world are controlled by men. The film-making world is controlled by men. It is useful to have forums where that level of competition is taken away. In jobs, there is in-your-face sexism that is widespread and ingrained.

Regarding the Alternating Currents show: The more established an institution, the less likely they are to take a risk. In art school the ratio is 60% women and 40% men. In the art world, the ratio is drastically different, not for lack of women artists and not for lack of people getting out there. For every layer/level of recognition, the closer you get to the "top" the smaller the layer becomes. By the time you get to the top there are very few women to pick from. At every level there are fewer women selected.

E.G. Crichton

bio

E.G. Crichton is a visual artist who creates multi-media installations and collaborative temporal public works. Her art explores hidden histories, collective social concerns, and controversies about sex and the body. Her subject matter grows out of a collusion between site and historical research, stories from her life, and stories from the lives of people she interviews. Mostly viewer activated, the work brings together a mix of visual and written/spoken media: projected imagery, sculptural forms, text, video, sound, and electronic components. The technology she uses juxtaposes equipment from the recent past with contemporary electronic technology. She lives in San Francisco, and is Assistant Professor of Art at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

thoughts

It is important to have women's only events for almost anything. I come out of the feminist movement of the late 60's and 70's. It is necessary at certain stages of things. For technology this is especially true. Issues of access to control and power are gendered, and women can help each other have better access. This conference was a stepping stone.

I have mixed feelings about the title. On the one hand, although there are lots of words I've been willing to take over, embrace and use in a powerful way, I have never embraced the word "chick". I still remember being called a chick in hippy days. I didn't like being a chick, it had a proprietary sense implied. The association was not tough or strong. On the other hand, the title was refreshing because it was so flippant. The symposium needed a title that was sexy and catchy, and "Chik Tek" provided that. I like to think that there is a broad range of styles permissible for women that convey strength, and that these styles can seep into different contexts. I'd hate to think that technology just conveyed one style.

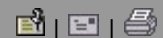
Regarding the gender and hierarchy difference between the two shows -- it's emblematic of what goes on all over the country. It is easier for women to be shown in small alternative galleries. The art world is pretty slow around this, it has not changed to keep up with other changes. Women are working with technology a lot, making inroads. When I teach computer art to college students, there are still more men than women, and the men are more likely to have prior experience. Young girls need to be exposed to technology earlier, and need access to training.

In the art world, technology is being featured now, unnaturally isolated from other mediums. The division between what is technology and what isn't becomes gimmicky, a forced straight-jacket. Maybe technology is too broad -- for example, a show could be organized by another principle, such as interactivity, which might include both work that uses technology and work that doesn't.

It does make sense to organize around the idea of technology when it comes to resources. Women could help each other have access to resources. Class is an important factor regarding who has access. Artists who have to work for a living have less time and fewer resources to buy computers. Our organizing as women needs to be inflected with a deeper politics, to provide help across class and race lines. The question is not how rich white women can be equal to men. Women need to be more radical. The question is: who is the 'we'?

Concluding remarks

The thoughts and stories shared by the women interviewed are dynamic. I enjoyed the diversity in points of view. Although limited by time, I wanted more -- my desire was to keep going, to continue the conversations and interviews with more of the participants, and ideally, women and men in the audience. People's viewpoints were enlightening and filled with passion, and to hear the frank feelings was to take a step to re-examine my own beliefs, feed off the synergistic energy, and ask the question "Where do we go from here?" One thing I hope we do is to continue the dialogue.



::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Wood

:: Chik Tek Symposium Revisited - Jun 14 1998

