



## Editorial

### **do not exist. europe, woman, digital medium**

9

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#### **Question**

Is it possible to speak of the non-existence of what is labeled “Europe,” “Woman” or “Digital Medium” and does this open up a new perspective in thinking and behavior? The project *do not exist. europe, woman, digital medium* is designed to examine his concept and experiment with it. The idea of a lacking, incomplete or imperfect existence of the three notions, conjectures or realities has already been undertaken in different ways by media and cultural studies, historical and political sciences as well as by psychoanalysis, gender studies and media art: however, the attempt has not yet been made to bring these different concepts together and into confrontation with each other. Our challenge is to perform this in full recognition of a female perspective, allowing the querying of the non-existence of Woman from a female point of view.

#### **What indeed is the Europe we speak of?**

Although we need this illusory point of identity and reference, we are not at all capable of precisely identifying its meaning. Beyond the question of the multi-layered political and legal structures of the European Union, “Europe” in a more general sense is today neither distinctly defined in reference to a political unity nor to a historico-cultural or ‘ethnic’ one. In what way can ‘we’ be defined as members of a certain union, bearers of certain rights, representatives of a certain culture? On the basis of which grounds and traditions is “fortress Europe” being erected against “invaders”?



## “La femme n’existe pas”

said Jacques Lacan in his much-quoted provocative formula, more accurately translated as: “The Woman (as a universal) does not exist.”<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva reaches the same conclusion: “Strictly speaking, ‘woman’ cannot be said to exist,” as does Monique Wittig, putting it differently: “Lesbians are not women,” or “I am not a woman.”<sup>2</sup> Apart from these deliberations on the excludedness of ‘woman’ in universal statements and the unconscious, there is obviously the area of excludedness of individual women from their participation in social opportunities. The function of ‘women’ not only as symbolic objects of trade but of trafficking is drastically exemplified by the wave of female migrants from ‘eastern’ to ‘western’ Europe. And is it equally exemplified from another point of view in the potentiated exclusion of lesbian representation? Can these discriminations of the female be seen in relation to each other? And: does ‘the’ man (male identity) exist? Does ‘being’ exist as ‘all’ or always only in the particular? “There is no whole of being, no ‘all there is,’ there are only appearances in their particularity.”<sup>3</sup>

## The digital medium

is strongly linked with diverse assumptions of disappearance. Since Walter Benjamin’s assertion of the disappearance of the *aura* by reproduction technologies (especially photography and film)<sup>4</sup>, notions of a disappearance of so-called reality, materiality, identity of the image and the body, or even of the visible, have been formulated since the development of digital and telecommunications media. These descriptions have influenced many concepts of “cyberspace,” in net.art as well as in the popular mythologies of the World Wide Web. How to deal with these perceived disappearances? “What is today included in an pre-eminent sense of being, can on principle not be seen although — or because — the visible is seen first. In this sense the history of optical media is a history of disappearing,” suggests Friedrich Kittler.<sup>5</sup> How can universal statements like this on the history of perception be made, if we take seriously that ‘appearances in their particularity’ are the only ones we have and if making difference, especially the sexual difference the center of our questions?

1 Lacan, Jacques (1998): *Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, [1972–1973], Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Transl. Bruce Fink, London/New York, “There’s no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital W indicating the universal.”, 72.

2 Both quoted in: Butler, Judith (1990): *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, 3, 112–113. See: Wittig, Monique (1992): ‘The Straight Mind’ [1980] in: *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston 1992, 32.

3 Copjek, Joan (2004): *Imagine There’s No Woman, Ethics and Sublimation*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 4.

4 “And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term

‘aura’ and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art.” Benjamin, Walter (1936): *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction*, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm> [last access: 07/07/2008].

5 “Was heute in einem eminenten Sinn von Sein ist, läßt sich prinzipiell nicht sehen, obwohl oder weil es das Sichtbare erst zu sehen gibt. Insofern ist die Geschichte der optischen Medien eine Geschichte des Verschwindens.” Kittler, Friedrich A. (1999): *Optische Medien, Berliner Vorlesung*, Berlin, 35.





*do not exist. europe, woman, digital medium* intends to create opportunities where these three topics and threads of discussion can interact.

## Call

"We invite (women) presenters who epistemologically, politically or artistically pursue a gender-conscious approach through their work. Send all proposals to Frauen.Kultur.Labor thealit: kontakt@thealit.de."<sup>6</sup>

11

This Call for Contributions to a transdisciplinary European Lab combined with the conceptual notes above was sent out 2006 and addressed all artists, theorists, activists interested in participating in a project on the question of (non) *existence* applied on Europe, woman, and the digital medium. The response proved high interests in the intersection of these three topics created with the strange double negation of existence. No mathematical affirmation of 'existence', with complete and reciprocal elimination of both negations can be thought of, but a difference of both negations persists. The medium of negation is used as well as a logical *and* a graphical one, thus aggressively creating a gap in the center of the sujet in question. This main idea was honored by a great number of highly qualified and original proposals that reached thealit from artists, filmmakers, theorists etc. — including many proposals from 'eastern' European countries — all of them offering subtle or energetic practices of keeping the center of the sujet open by precisely filling it improperly.

## A conference, exhibitions and a workshop

In 2006<sup>7</sup> the initial conference *do not exist. europe, woman, digital medium* was held in Bremen at 'Kulturprojekte Katrin Rabus' and at 'Cinema im Ostertor'.<sup>8</sup> This international meeting of theorists and artists was followed 2007 by an exhibition at 'Society for Contemporary Art (GAK)', Bremen on *[open] spaces, states of political and media space exhibited*,<sup>9</sup> accompanied by a program of video screenings, talks and lectures. In the same year<sup>10</sup> another exhibition and a workshop took place on the topic of *eastwest se/x* at the 'Academy of Media Arts (KHM)', Cologne. About 50 presenters from 14 European countries were involved and most of them 'meet' again — as authors in this book at hand.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The project was organized, by the thealit Frauen.Kultur.Labor, Bremen in collaboration with the Estonian Academy of Arts, E-Media Centre, Tallinn and The Gender Studies Center at the Sofia University Faculty of Philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> September 28–October 1, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Thealit, Frauen.Kultur.Labor, *do not exist*, <http://www.thealit.de/lab/donotexist/conf.htm> [last access: 07/07/2008].

<sup>9</sup> April 27–June 10, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> May 11–May 17, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> ... as the conference's presentations already can be accessed via streaming video at thealit's webpage documenting the conference *do not exist* at: <http://www.thealit.de/lab/donotexist/streaming.htm> [last access: 07/07/2008].





## Re-presentations in printed matter

Though the approach of this book towards the whole of this trans-European lab follows the main constellation of the *do not exist* conference and the *[open] spaces* exhibition, no formal bias is intended, but, on the contrary, the work on two interrelated topics within the same format. No conference proceedings followed by a fine art-catalogue should be expected, but a practical critique of these genres. The difference between a conference's or exhibition's situation to a book as a printed matter is equal and this insight already allows conventional routines to change. Theorists and artists — if these characteristics were still applicable to the often multidisciplinary participants — have both been asked to send a contribution to a book in retrospect after their presentations within the structure of the *do not exist* lab. Thus, the book offers *re-presentations* bearing traces of mutual influences having taken place as well between participants of the lab as between means and media of representation.

Within a book it's worth a try, because inevitable, to change the constellation of the works interacting within the two section. Elements of *eastwest se/x* now are part of the *do not exist* and the *[open] spaces* sections within this book.<sup>12</sup> Anyway, as an exhibition or a conference they — in every sense of the words — will have *taken place* already and elsewhere.

Now the contributions of this book *take place* again, in a place that 'does not exist', except in your reading...

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<sup>12</sup> The workshop addressed topics that had already been developed at the conference and the exhibition in Bremen. See: Claudia Reiche, 'Do not exist: Politics of Sexuation' and by Andrea Sick, 'How Space and Zones Gain Existence: Surveillance and Political Control on the Spot' and Claudia Reiche/Andrea Sick: 'Opening open spaces' within this volume. The exhibition of *eastwest*

*se/x* consisted of two video installations: *Cosmoclub* (Croatia 2004) by Sonja Vuk; *Malholandrajv* (Slovak Republic 2003) by Anna Daučíková. The whole programming can be looked up at: <http://thealit.de/lab/donotexist/> [last access: 07/07/2008].