

Vicki Callahan
UW-Milwaukee

Feminisms and Feminists in the Public Sphere

Just a few days ago (September 4), an article in the *LA Times* quoted the well known conservative talk show host Laura Ingraham as saying: “Sarah Palin represents a new feminism.” While I do give myself considerable credit for being particularly nonsectarian on these matters and always careful to point out the need for an ‘s’ to be attached to the term feminism, I have to admit, I was taken aback. For Ingraham did not invoke the murky appellation of post-feminism *nor* did she *reject* feminism with this comment but rather attempted to seize the word “feminism” for a conservative agenda in the election of 2008. If we write off Ingraham’s comment as manically cynical or as sadly misinformed politics, I believe we misread an important moment in women’s political history. That is to say, feminism today finds itself in a highly performative mode, subject to ongoing and massive rewritings and revisions in line with intersubjective *practices*. The Ingraham quote is symptomatic of how fluid the terms of the debate are around the very word, feminism. My remarks here are then to point out a range of potential practices, specifically enacted within the context of new media technology, which might reshape our understanding of feminism(s) with a consistent use of the term in line with its past history, but directed to present and future possibilities. Specifically I will talk about the structure and objectives of my website, *feminism 3.0*, begun in January 2008 (<http://web.mac.com/vacall/Site/Welcome.html>) that I use simply as an example of one strategy. More importantly, what is at stake in our larger discussion is a definition of feminism that is situated in an historical “timeline” that is not linear, but open, that moves or indeed *flows* seamlessly between the past, present, and future times; what many feminist theorists call, “becoming.”

There are many wonderful sites on the web, which promote and explore feminist and/or feminist media issues, but many of these are directed to what I find to be fairly niche audiences and typically framed toward exclusively activist, academic, or personal journal type musings (such entries usually focus on the contradictions of feminism today). All of these foster a more discrete selection of time and I would argue more “closed” definitions of feminism, which produce many micro, specialized, or indeed idiosyncratic readings (which in turn enable aberrant remarks like Ingraham’s to get traction) So how might we expand the conversation on feminism while remaining consistent with our history? Let me use the website as an example of options we might pursue. In setting up a feminist media website I thought it might be useful to have a somewhat more experimental site, which utilized the different tools of new media to open up a conversation across a range of categories and begin to reshape the discussion

of feminism today (both *how* we approach and *who* we are talking with when we have these discussions). I wanted a conversation that would include and engage media artists, academics, fans, popular historians and most importantly I wanted cross-generational participants. I also wanted different formats for conversations and information to explore how putting multiple *forms* in play might change the kinds of discussions we had.

The organizing ideas for my website were basic theoretical premises about new media aesthetics, in particular, that it fostered "*distributed authorship*" or *collaboration*. I solicited both async blogs (from different places, people, times) on different arenas of research (hybrid writing and gender and media research) and organized a "live blog" on a film premiere (*Sex in the City*). In that case I brought together an "indie" director, an experimental media artist, and media scholars -- representatives of the "second" and "third" waves -- to provide cultural and formal responses to the film. Using a media rich format and open-ended discussion, we had a good first effort at breaking through barriers of academic, industry, or fan lingo. I plan another live blog in time for the debates on the issue of female representations during this election year (and will post assorted commentaries prior to the live blog to give the discussion more focus).

A second area of new media aesthetics that shaped the site was the idea that it might help us "write differently" or as Elizabeth Grosz states, to help us "think the new." Here I was interested in the possibility of *new paths for writing (media) history*. Specifically, I wanted to document the work of women artists, who have been central to innovation in media arts but essentially left at the margins of that history. I began a podcast series bringing together images and the voice of the artist so that, in part, a new generation of scholars and artists could see and hear the processes and practices central to an artist's work. The "hybrid" form of the podcast itself is meant to be a merger of the creative and the critical and to open up the kinds of areas we can pursue across still far too rigid disciplinary boundaries.

In sum, my comments here are not so much about the website itself, but rather about some simple but powerful new media tools and some practical suggestions for how they might be implemented to foster a more robust dialogue about the definition of feminism(s) today.