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HO & NIEMETZ: WOMEN OF A MODERN ARTISTIC ERA, OR, HOW TWO WOMEN BROUGHT TECHNOLOGY INTO THEIR CRAFTS

written by Guest Contributor July 12, 2019



Jocelyn Ho

Jocelyn Ho met me at a coffee shop in the Pico-Fairfax neighborhood of Los Angeles. She ordered herself a cookie and a tea, then sat down across from me to discuss the revolution she's igniting within the fields of music and technology.

I most wanted to ask her about "Women's Labor," her ongoing project that repurposes domestic technologies, such as irons and rotary dryers, as musical instruments. The larger fabric with which Ho builds her academic and artistic persona is sewn around this theme of human connection to our everyday technologies and particularly explores the place of women within this connection. Ultimately, we ended up talking about much more than just one of her projects, but I was still very pleased to learn her intentions and goals behind "Women's Labor."

"The initiative is a feminist one," Ho said about "Women's Labor," a project she's still expanding. "Domestic work is really in the women's realm, and the women's realm is in the private sphere. It's away from the public eye; it's invisible labor, it's unpaid labor. Bringing that into a performative spectacle shines light on domesticity. It's something you don't see and you don't talk about in public conversations."

The project is collaborative--she works with a composer and a technologist to create instruments out of objects we might see only as utilitarian. Ho enjoys bringing people from different disciplines together to make something that someone in just one field would never innovate. Her collaborators on the first leg of "Women's Labor" are composer/technical consultant Margaret Shedel and technical director Matthew Blessing.

An iron and an ironing board were the first subjects of transformation. She and her team presented the project at the Alliance of Women in Media Arts and Technology up at UC-Santa Barbara in February, and she performed the piece at UCLA just a couple of days later. She also presented it at Stanford in March.

"It's my goal [to explore] what the boundaries of these instruments are," Ho said. "And so with the ['Women's Labor' project], there are going to be installations, there are going to be participant workshops, and there is going to be commissioning of composers to compose for these [new] instruments...So I'm also exploring how people can actually interact with these instruments...then, when they go to the actual concert, they've already played with these instruments and have even thought about notions of domesticity and what that means to them."



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Most recently, in the first week of June, she presented the piece at New Interfaces for Musical Expression, or NIME, in Brazil. The conference attracts musicians creating music in untraditional ways via technology. Unfortunately, according to Ho, NIME tends to be a very homogenous, male-dominated space. Unsurprisingly, Ho and her collaborators won the Diversity Award for their work with "Women's Labor," as they challenge patriarchal standards and traditions through these technologically augmented domestic tools.

"Nowadays, we're trying to rediscover some of these women composers," Ho told me with excitement, hardly finding a moment to take a sip of her tea or a bite of her cookie. "And in 'Women's Labor,' I'm explicitly commissioning women composers to compose for these domestic tool-turned instruments."

Ho hopes that people will interact with the project—directly engaging with the instrument, themselves—then take the conversation beyond the exhibit. She hopes that when people see an iron, they will be triggered to consider their own role in domesticity.

Ho's work often includes the audience members. Her most recently finished collaborative work, "Synesthesia Playground," challenges concert-goers to interact with music in a way that utilizes their full body, calling for the senses to experience a deeper component beyond listening that music has to offer. For this project, Ho composed a piece on the piano called "Sheng" and had the audience use their mobile phones as instruments. She wore a fiber-optic jacket that pulsed to her heartbeat and the music frequency. Meanwhile, a projection on the side of the piano showed an image responding to the sound of the music. This intricate exhibit was about bringing people together and emphasizing the human-technology connection.

"The audience actually joins a network, so they receive instructions while I'm playing the piano and while the piece is going on," Ho explained. "They can actually gesture with their phones—tickle the bubbles, slash your phone when you hear a flutter! So [I'm] really trying to include the audience in the music, breaking the fourth wall."

Similar to Ho's objective with "Women's Labor," "Synesthesia Playground" was, most simply put, about "transforming really mundane everyday objects with sound," according to Ho. She wants "to try to shine light on everyday living. With the ironing board, it's shining light on domestic lives. With the phone," it's about taking this object and "turning it into a musical instrument—something you can make art with. You're kind of looking at it in a different way."

Ho's work brings attention to how our bodies interact with music, sound, and each other. And her mission isn't over yet.

[Keep up with her work here.](#)

Anne Niemetz

When Anne Niemetz began studying media arts at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, she was on the cusp of something new: the integration of technology into the world of art in ways beyond using solely video as had been done in the '60s, '70s, and '80s before her. But she was also in the process of breaking the glass ceiling within media studies, of dismantling a male-dominated field with her mind, creativity, and ingenuity.

"They were telling me, 'You're going to be one of the very few women in this field,' and I'd just be like, 'I don't care,'" Niemetz said. "But of course, 20 years later with a more mature view on the world, and I've been working at University as a lecturer for 12 years now. [I've] discover[ed] things and see[n] things, and I certainly see the unjust. This whole problem that I think we have as feminists, now—any big institution will, I think, have that issue of the [patriarchy] being quite sort of stuck in there."

Niemetz graduated from UCLA with an MFA in design—media arts, and now lives in New Zealand where she's a Senior Lecturer in the media design program at Victoria University. One of the classes she teaches is Wearable Technology, which very much breaks away from the two, pigeonholing ideas that media studies is mostly video-based work and that the media studies sphere is particularly biased toward men.

Wearable technology "combines the fields of costume design, fashion, and technology in terms of micro-controllers, sensors, reading body data, reading environmental data, and then expressing that through the dresser doing something with the data," Niemetz told me over a Skype video call as she lit a cigarette thousands of miles from where I sat in my Los Angeles apartment. "And that is a lovely field because, in many ways, we think of fashion and clothes as something feminine...and then we have the electronics, the micro controllers, which are definitely something understood as male—technology chips and stuff, computer stuff. [This combination] is a great field of exploration."

Niemetz established the class at Victoria University, which is, in fact, the only university in New Zealand to offer such a course. One of Niemetz' goals is to make this class accessible to any student who wants to take it, to spread her love and knowledge of wearable technology to students of all genders who want to break into the field. The class has a very low prerequisite and is available to third-year students. As far as what the students are able to do once enrolled in the class—well, that's up to each individual student. Niemetz described the class as "very open."

"I start at the very beginning with electronics, so everybody has a chance to learn it," she said. "I really hope that people bring in their own interests and work to their strengths. So it's up to them if they want to do something conceptual or something commercial or something artistic. Something practical or something not practical. It's up to the students. And I try to support them, and I teach them only what's necessary in terms of technology. And if they want to take that

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further, it's not a problem."

Niemetz's robust teaching career has not put an end to the work she's doing in the studio as a media artist. Her current project, "Drone Sweet Drone," showcases "embroidered blueprints using Arduino-powered lights" and explores the binaries between "the past and the future, art and science, the amateur and the professional, and the feminine and the masculine."

According to Niemetz, the drone project "is certainly the work that has the most outspoken feminist angle so far...it is a play of what is traditionally considered feminine craft with masculine technology. Again, the electronics, and then the fabric and the stitching. And this area I find absolutely fascinating."

Sarah Baker, a friend and supporter of Niemetz, wrote, "The blueprint text prompts us to further consider the potential of drones, as well as the gendering of new technologies and the masculine associations of war and surveillance. 'Drone Sweet Drone' is purposely conspicuous, rather than stealthy. Turning surveillance on its head, it wants us to study the fly on the wall that is increasingly becoming a greater part of our lives."

This ethics of considering potentials is not isolated to "Drone Sweet Drone." Rather, it is a value that follows Niemetz through all sectors of her life. As an artist, an educator, and a feminist, Niemetz told me she is a believer in the democratization of technology, of understanding it and working with it.

"It's really, maybe, our responsibility as artists, to investigate the technologies that come to the world either commercially or otherwise, that scientists are involved in. Because we have a say, too, and we might have a perspective that could really bring new insights. I'm a big proponent of the arts and sciences [working] together. And that means the technologists and theorists working together for the sake of humanity, to keep communicating and trying to fix that split, the split between the two cultures."

[Niemetz's home page here.](#)

Rebecca Gross organizes poetry & prose readings at bookstores around the city of Los Angeles and self-publishes a zine called *All Female Menu*, which features the art and writing of female-identifying millennials. She'll also be starting a graduate program at Loyola Marymount University in the fall where she'll be instructing undergraduates on the craft of writing.

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