

Little of the world lends itself to continuous straight lines

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An email interview with Sadie Plant
by Amalie Smith

I was asked to interview Sadie Plant by the same Miriam Wistreich, who encouraged me to read Plant’s 1997 book, ‘Zeros + Ones’ in the first place. It was in the summer of 2017. I was working on a public commission for a high school in Copenhagen, making digitally woven tapestries in response to a request for “digital work”, and I was using the punched-card connection between the computer and the loom as a central argument for doing this. When I told Miriam about the project, she said, “You have to read this.” So I did. It was 20 years after it was first published, but the book became an instant companion, like making a friend from another decade. In the book Sadie Plant underlines the work of women in the development of digital technologies, and here textile production plays a leading role. Although I had already moved into the same field of research, reading the book made me light-headed and energetic; everything from yarn to software to bacteria is interwoven. Listen to this:

| Page 12: *The yarn is neither metaphorical nor literal, but quite simply material, a gathering of threads which twist and turn through the story of computing, technology, the sciences and arts. In and out of the punched holes of automated looms, up and down through the ages of spinning and weaving, back and forth through the fabrication of fabrics, shuttles and looms, cotton and silk, canvas and paper, brushes and pens, typewriters, carriages, telephone wires, synthetic fibers, electrical filaments, silicon strands, fiber-optic cables, pixelated screens, telecom lines, the World Wide Web, the Net, and matrices to come.*

Soon after I first read it, the book started coming up in conversations with colleagues and students again and again. It became evident that it had a growing number of dedicated younger readers – some of them not even born when the book was first published. How come? In long passages, ‘Zeros + Ones’ seems almost prophetic in its understanding of the structural and material changes that would arrive with the Internet. At the same time, it was written at a moment in time when everything *could* have worked out differently and, as such, it opens up a parallel universe of meta-thoughts. To demystify the book, I asked Sadie where it came from.

| AS: I want to ask you about the context of ‘Zeros + Ones’ – how did the project start, what did it grow out of?

| SP: The book had two main starting points. It was first an attempt to put a feminist spin on what would now be called the speculative thinking that was being hotly pursued in the circles I was in at the time. But I also wrote it in effort to counter what was then a strong feeling that the new technologies of the 1990s were somehow toys for the boys. I was keen to tell a different story about digitisation and its cultural, political, and philosophical implications.

| Page 13: *Neuromancer was neither the first nor the last of such confusions between fiction and fact, future and past. When Gibson described “bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void,” his cyberspace was already implementing earlier – or later – works of nonfiction: Alan Turing’s universal machine had drawn the devices of his day – calculators and typewriters – into a virtual system which brought itself on-line in the Second World War; Ada’s Analytical Engine, which backed the punched-card processes of the automated weaving machine; and Jacquard’s loom, which gathered itself on the gathering threads of weavers who in turn were picking up on the threads of the spiders and moths and webs of bacterial activity.*

| AS: What was the writing process like?

| SP: Slow and stressful;)

| AS: ‘Zeros + Ones’ is a book that does what it speaks about – one could say it is a woven book, a grand textile of quotes, references, ideas. How did you work with structuring and setting its complex pattern? Did you start out with a structure or did it emerge later?

| SP: I love telling stories, but sustained narratives elude me; perhaps I lack the patience or endurance to construct them. So part of the answer to this question is the simple one that I had to find another way of dealing with all the many and varied materials that fed into the book. But I also feel that little of the world lends itself to continuous straight lines. In relation to ‘Zeros + Ones’, it seemed clear to me that the book had to be more than a feminist history which would simply insert women into the existing narrative. The material was so disruptive that it challenged the whole notion of a linear history. By this point I had long been convinced that writing should, or at least can, do what it speaks about, as you say. In this sense the book really was composed by allowing its themes to dictate its structure and its style. This is something to which I am even more committed today.

| Page 67: The lozenge is emergent from the cloth, diagonal lines implicit in the grids of the weave. And even the most ornate and complex of woven designs retains this connection to the warps and wefts. When images are later painted, or written in the form of words on a page, patterns are imposed on the passive backdrop provided by the canvas or the page. But textile images are never imposed on the surface of the cloth: their patterns are always emergent from an active matrix, implicit in a web which makes them immanent to the processes from which they emerge.

| AS: You made the radical choice to use quotes without direct attribution, and you often don't mention who says what, except in the notes in the back of the book. What made you choose to do so?

| SP: I wanted to get away from standard academic models without losing the rigour and accountability they bring. So everything is sourced and referenced without interruption to the text. This approach has its problems and its critics, but I still like it. It too is a way of weaving different textures together to make a continuous cloth.

| AS: The juxtaposition of quotes and facts from different sources adds to a feeling of connectedness across time and space. For me, it aids a speculative way of thinking that can open up new perspectives and break down categorical thinking. At the same time I am more and more aware that this method can also allude to contra-factual connections, and that conspiracy theorists seem to be using it too.

| SP: Yes, absolutely. This is a real problem. What's problematic is less the way of writing than the lack of transparency it often entails. To say this is not to rely on some ideal of complete clarity or honest intentions, but it is to affirm that writing and thinking is always coming from somewhere and getting at something. It has a position and a context, it comes out of a time and place, and it always makes a commitment even, and especially, when it refuses or neglects to acknowledge this.

| Page 77: *It has long been assumed in the Western world that technologies are basically tools, means to ends decided in advance by those who make them and put them to use. (...) This crude model of the user and the used has legitimized the scientific projects, colonial adventures, sexual relations, and even the artistic endeavors of the modern world. It continues to inform the deployment of even the most complex machines.*

| AS: How was the book received in its time? Did it spark a debate?

| SP: I was so glad to have it finished that I rather abandoned it when it first went out into the world. It took me a while to come to terms with it. Some love it for the way in which it seemed to open up new ways to think and write; others are very critical of its lack of attention to feminist politics and real women's lives. In both cases I can see why.

| AS: How do you look back on the project today?

| SP: With some regrets, but satisfaction too: even now I get a lot of correspondence from readers who have clearly gained a lot from their engagement with the book. Some passages are beautiful and powerful and I still stand with them.

| Page 143: *In spite or perhaps even because of the impersonality of the screen, the digital zone facilitates unprecedented levels of spontaneous affection, intimacy, and informality, exposing the extent to which older media, especially what continues to be called "real life," come complete with a welter of inhibitions, barriers, and obstacles sidestepped by the packet-switching systems of the Net. Face-to-face communication – the missionary position so beloved of Western man – is not at all the most direct of all possible ways to communicate.*

|AS: Reading a book about technology 20 years after it was written gives the reader (at least) two pairs of eyes to read with. As much as ‘Zeros + Ones’ feels oddly contemporary, the reader’s mind can’t help but wander off into thoughts of how technology has developed since 1997.

|SP: Yes, a lot has changed.

|AS: Just to name a few developments: Computers have shrunk in size, their speed has increased, and wireless technologies are now able to transport enormous amounts of data. The engineering aspects of computers have been hidden behind a seamless interface, and the same can be said about the labour and resources that go into making them. Google, Facebook and Amazon have gained near-monopoly on sorting digital information and being our entry point to the online world. Alternative facts, conspiracy theories, and hatred against minorities and women thrive on social media. But so, too, do powerful protest movements such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter.

|SP: The book was already pitched against some of these developments: the mainstream commercialisation of the internet, for example, and the smooth logics of surveillance and control which were built into the technology. It tried to disrupt all this by suggesting that even the most binary structures and stable systems could have other unintentional effects. But digitisation has done nothing to shift the extreme imbalances of power that were in place twenty years ago and are even more pronounced today, and those seeking to maintain or restore this status quo - male superiority, white supremacy, neat divides between sexes and sexualities – are bound to use whatever platforms are at hand. Fortunately it is equally inevitable that those who are working to change the status quo will use them too:)

| Page 35: *It takes two to make a binary, but all these pairs are two of a kind, and the kind is always kind of one. 1 and 0 make another 1. Male and Female add up to man. There is no female equivalent. No universal woman at his side. The male is one, one is everything, and the female has “nothing you can see.”*

Woman “functions as a hole,” a gap, a space, “a nothing – that is a nothing the same, identical, identifiable ... a fault, a flaw, a lack, an absence, outside the system of representations and autorepresentations.

|AS: When your book was translated into Danish in 2001, the title was “Det binære køn”, which literally translates to “The binary sex” or the “The binary gender”. (We don’t have two words for gender/sex in Danish). I find the Danish title an awkward fit for the content of the book. What do you think?

|SP: I can’t judge the Danish translation, but perhaps the fault lies more with the book itself. The attempt was to challenge the binary by promoting zero at the expense of one, but while this was a productive line of thought, it also risked repeating the very distinction it wanted to defeat.

|AS: How have you seen the close connection between women and technology you describe in ‘Zeros + Ones’ develop since the mid 90s?

|SP: To the extent that many artists and writers seem to have found it productive and empowering, this was a connection which was well worth making. An alliance of women and machines, both not-quite-subjects and more-than-objects, is a cheeky and subversive move. But for all its rhetorical power, I now feel it is rather too simplistic to set up “man” as the problem: who is this chap? Did he ever exist? And if he was only ever an ideal, isn’t he a rather easy target – literally a straw man? For a more pragmatic answer, I look at my teenage daughters and see young women at ease with technologies and sexualities in ways that would have astounded me twenty years ago.

|AS: Is cyberfeminism still relevant today?

|SP: The recent “post-cyberfeminism” exhibition in Zurich made me think that the moment really has passed. To be an “ism” is bad enough, but once you hit “post”, it’s all over.

| Page 189: *On the computer monitor, any change to the image is also a change to the program; any change to the programming brings another image to the screen. This is the continuity of product and process at work in the textiles produced on the loom. The program, the image, the process and the product: these are all the softwares of the loom. Digital fabrications can be endlessly copied without fading into inferiority; patterns can be pleated and repeat, replicated folds across a screen.*

| AS: Could you write the same book with the same ideas today, or how would you update it?

| SP: The book is very much of its time, which was a brief moment of dramatic technological change and intense philosophical inquiry. It could not be written today, and to update it would be to pull it apart. But the fact that the book is dated seems entirely appropriate: no text comes from nowhere, or emerges out of time. All writing happens at some time and in a place, and this is something to celebrate.

| Page 189: *Like all textiles, the new softwares have no essence, no authenticity. Just as weavings and their patterns are repeatable without detracting from the value of the first one made, digital images complicate the questions of origin and originality, authorship and authority with which Western conceptions of art have been preoccupied.*

| AS: What are you working on today?

| SP: I'm working in art schools, and very interested in what it means to teach and learn, to practice theory and theorise practice, to make and produce and put work into the world. I'm also keen to temper the speculative turn with what are now rather unfashionable commitments to a politics of liberation and equality. I am writing something along these lines, but I know I'll jinx it if I share it now.