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Maya Zalbidea Paniagua,
"Towards a Multimodal Analysis of da Rimini's *Dollspace*"
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Abstract: In her article "Towards a Multimodal Analysis of da Rimini's *Dollspace*" Maya Zalbidea Paniagua analyzes Francesca da Rimini's *Dollspace* <<http://dollyoko.thing.net/>> (1997-2001). By analyzing *Dollspace* Zalbidea Paniagua reinforces the proposition that studies on material aesthetics and intermediality encompass a process of rethinking the notion of boundaries across material structures. This is clearly shown in da Rimini's *Dollspace*, where ambivalence cuts across discursive genres and distinct material formats of image, text, and audio. Hypertext engages the user/participant in a dialogue with the machine and, in the case of *Dollspace*, across people's sexual attitudes. *Dollspace* seeks to do more than to just shock the user: it wants to haunt its user to become an intersubjectively embodied act.

Maya Zalbidea Paniagua

Towards a Multimodal Analysis of da Rimini's *Dollspace*

Francesca da Rimini is an ex-member of VNS Matrix, a women's new media art group formed by four artists in Australia: Francesca da Rimini, Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, and Virginia Barratt. From 1991 to 1997 they presented installations, events, and public art works internationally using new media, photography, sound, and video. They are probably best known for their 1991 controversial "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" which was printed on a poster used in their art installations, distributed as postcards during their conferences and later published online, and translated into Japanese, Italian, French, Spanish, German, Russian, and Finnish. Being artists from an isolated area in Australia, they did not expect international acclaim. Julianne Pierce declared during a private interview with me at the LaptopRus Conference at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid: "We were very surprised at having such an international acclamation because we came from Adelaide, an Australian dessert. We didn't expect that our artistic creations and ideas were going to be spread worldwide. People encountered our group in our web pages, many came to VNS Matrix exhibitions, and then people from many different parts of the world wrote to us" (Personal Interview). VNS Matrix probably took their inspiration from Donna J. Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" and they shared a similar appeal to women's visibility and participation in cyberspace and new media technology. VNS Matrix were interested in "combining pop culture and cyberpunk" (Pierce, Personal Interview) and their main goals were to dismantle the dominant discourse in virtual as in real places, to denounce gender violence, and to support women's artistic creations on the internet.

Francesca da Rimini is one of the pioneers in experimenting with hypermedia narratives creating (cyber)spaces in which new virtual conceptions of gender and sexuality take place. She uses parody, obscene language, and pop icons to promote gender equality in real life, as well as in cyberspace, i.e., "hyperreal" life. *Dollspace* <<http://dollyoko.thing.net/>> (1997-2001) is her longest and best known hypermedia creation: it consists of a collage of fragments of the most common practices in cyberspace such as personal e-mails, hacktivist acts, and erotic chats online in virtual reality systems known as MOOs. In *Dollspace*, a Japanese ghost girl called doll yoko (written in small letters) introduces gothic stories about fantasies of rape, incest, and masochism and da Rimini explored the *simulacra* of various types of sexualities by changing gender roles in chats, sexual stories online, and the experience of the internet user who becomes a voyeur watching pornography. da Rimini provides the viewer pornographic images as a pleasant activity and though she is not an anti-pornography feminist, she denounces sexual exploitation: "Throughout DOLL SPACE there are a lot of images taken from pornography that I found in Japan that you could buy just as in the corner shop where you buy your milk and you buy a little 5 dollar magazine and often of very young girls ... girls who look like they are only maybe 12 or 16 so I was working with those kinds of images and they became another kind of manifestation of DOLL YOKO the infantilised sexualised ... young Asian female. Who also embodies some of the complexity I feel about pornography and how much it is enjoyable and how much it is problematic when it is involving younger people" (da Rimini, "All Women" <<http://www.platoniq.net/nknw/fdr.htm>>).

Dollspace is illustrated hyperfiction with seven hundred pages, two thousand images, and a thirty-minutes long original soundtrack. It is a collaborative work in which the Mexican pioneer of "hacktivism," Ricardo Domínguez, contributed with his anti-capitalist ideas and texts about Zapatistas. The Taiwanese US-American new media artist Shu Lea Cheang — filmmaker of the Japanese science fiction and pornographic film *I.K.U* — designed erotic, porn, and gore Asian graphics, and composer Michael Grimm added a dystopian and cyberpunk atmosphere with an industrial gothic soundtrack reminding of the dark and steamy Vangelis composition for *Blade Runner*. da Rimini produced the internet installation using "simple html coding and Javascript that flourished before flash animation, before database-driven sites were more common, and before the advent of blogging" ("The Art"). She started *Dollspace* in 1997 and continued adding hypertext and images through 2001, transforming it from "a clear and poetic narrative line of flight to a more segmentary and diaristic work" ("The Art"). There is not a single plot but stories within other stories, a poem, fragments of essays, and e-mails. It is a non-linear and open-ended hypermedia. The main narrator of the stories is doll yoko, a ghost girl who personifies all the murdered innocent young women. da Rimini denounces the fact that thousands of women are killed around the world because of being considered inferior to men. The name of this kind of killing is "femicide," which the feminist writer and activist Diana E.H. Russell redefined from

the early nineteenth-century English concept to describe misogynist murders. In turn, da Rimini took her inspiration during her visit to Japan to create hyperfiction about ghosts of girls killed for misogynistic reasons: "It arose from a time that I spent in Kyoto, in Japan and I was staying in a little rice paper hut in the mountains and the local people showed me a pond [where] for centuries women used to drown their baby daughters because there had been a practise of female infanticide in Japan. And I found that a very haunting and disturbing image that for so many centuries the local women had come to this particular place where I was staying and had to kill the daughters that they had just given birth to because they were female and not male" (da Rimini, "All Women").

As the user enters *Dollspace*, he/she encounters an interface with the word "hauntings" in the middle (see Figure 1). These words have the typography and color of Japanese anime and there is a small image of a Japanese picture on the right side whereby both serve as an anticipation of Japanese pop culture references. The background is in black color, which makes semantically reference to a gothic atmosphere. This page is a preface of the work because the name of the author is not mentioned:

Figure 1: "hauntings," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca da Romini to the author.



The word "hauntings" corresponds to the complete name of the text, which is *Dollspace ... Hauntologies*. The term "hauntology" is a reference to Jacques Derrida's concept in his 1993 *Specters of Marx*, a portmanteau of "haunt" and "ology," in turn referring to "ontology." Thus, hauntology would be the presence of the specter, which is neither a being nor a non-being: "A specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back" (11). Derrida's concept suggests that the present exists only with respect to the past and that society after the end of history will begin to orient itself towards ideas and aesthetics towards the "ghost" of the past. Thus, da Rimini uses the concept because it shares a relationship with cyberpunk culture in which the future world is considered a dystopia of alienated beings committing the same old mistakes of the past where hallucinations of ghosts of historical figures reappear. The ghost has been used in cyberpunk narratives as a metaphor of how people's bodies are constantly haunted by the spaces they inhabit, by other people, by machines, and by their own obsessions: "That of the stranger employed to stress the difficulty of living with the ghosts and aliens that are inside us, and that of the 'doll' as an intriguing admixture of the natural and the artificial" (Cavallaro xix).

Once the user clicks on the image of the Japanese cartoon of an old man on the right-hand corner the link brings up the cover of *Dollspace* in which we can click on "download soundtrack for an empty space" or directly "enter dollspace" (see Figure 2). On the cover we see a photomontage of a Soviet Union stamp with Russian letters. In the middle there is an icon of a Japanese girl who symbolizes Doll Yoko as we will see and at both sides of the stamp there are drawings of female astronauts. After having translated the sentences in Russian I discovered that their content makes allusion to 12 April, Cosmonautics Day, to pay homage to Yuri Gagarin, the first man who travelled outer space when his Vostok spacecraft completed an orbit of the Earth on 12 April 1961. Of relevance here is that the understanding of these images and finding their association with the content of the hypermedia text is possible only by research about the cultural signs alluded to thus to understand the metaphorical meanings:

Figure 2: "Enter Dollspace," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca da Rimini to the author.

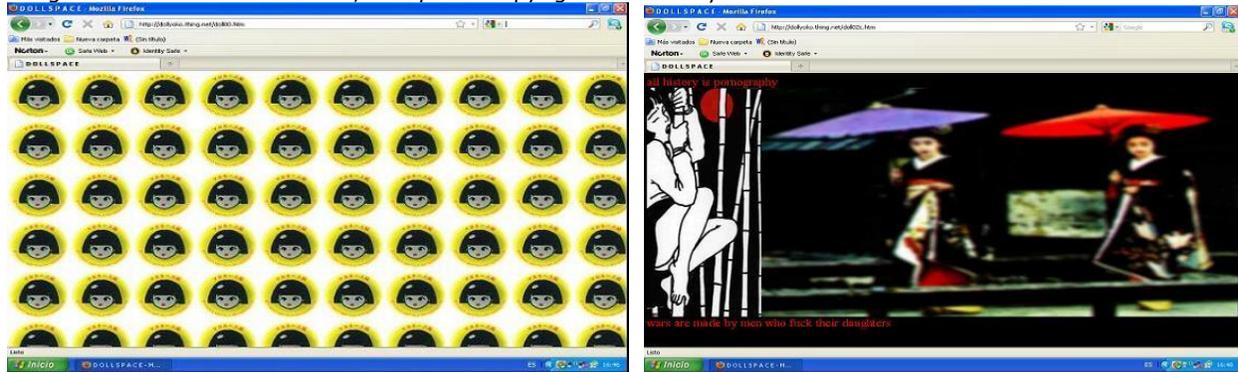


The name "dollspace" refers to the protagonist of the hypertext, "doll yoko," who has multiple identities within herself. On the one hand she is an innocent child, while on the other she has monstrous desires of torturing all those men who rape innocent girls, parents who commit incest, and those who are involved in sexual exploitation of children. In this hyperfiction there are not only stories about those murdered girls at birth, but also stories about victims of wars and terrorist acts, as well as those aspect which are not visible in media. All those dead or invisible beings in mass media are ghosts which haunt the Internet and whose only refuge seems to be "dollspace." I also found that the official website of the NASA International Space Station's experiments are carried out using Matroshka (also called Phantom) which is a mannequin that has been used to study cosmic radiation dose that relate to the health of space travelers on long-duration missions. The experiment is named "Matroshka dolls" after the Russian nested dolls. In this experiment, the doll measured the doses on the skin surface of the separate components of ionizing cosmic radiation. A realistic human torso was used in order to establish the relation between skin doses and organ doses. Dolls are also used for long travels outer space: "This research is critical to understanding how to protect astronauts from radiation as they spend long durations in space on board the space station" ("Matroshka 1). Thus, the association to the Russian dolls sent to space brings forth new readings in da Rimini's hyperfiction because the structure and narrative of *Dollspace* can be understood as a Russian doll, a set of dolls as boxes of different sizes and fitting into each other. The reference to Russian dolls can also be extended to the concept of the Chinese box in literature where in a novel or drama narratives are set in further narratives thus giving views from different perspectives. The Chinese box (of which the Russian doll is a version) suggests that "the entity is a container, and what it contains are other entities" (Pumain 84). This is exactly what symbolizes "doll yoko," an entity in which live other entities and thus *Dollspace* is like a Russian doll in which we click and we find another story, and clicking in one word or image we find another story, and the same images and words are reproduced and repeated several times creating a feeling of never ending story or *mise-en-abîme*. Therefore, the image seems to reproduce itself infinitely. Examples of pieces of art in which there is *mise-en-abîme* would be "Las Meninas" by Diego Velázquez in which there is a painting inside of a painting or Jan Van Eyck's "The Arnolfini Wedding" in which a mirror in the middle is reflecting the characters of the painting. Interestingly, *mise-en-abîme* is a literary device used frequently in electronic literature and it belongs to an art principle which creates a feeling of infinite regression: "The fragment of *mise en abyme* acts as a kind of mirror image of the larger work. In modernist art *mise en abyme* also constitutes a questioning of the concept of origin as it opens up the possibility of infinite regress" (Ricardo 245).

Once inside *Dollspace*, we move through one webpage after another, in the first page we find the repeated image of a manga icon of a Japanese girl called "doll yoko" (see Figure 3). In ancient times in Japan, girls who were deemed not "useful" were killed by their parents under the government's demans. This practice persists today in China and in parts of India where a female offspring is

considered less worth than a male. The repeated image of a Japanese girl's head with some Japanese words around it inside of a yellow circle means that these girls are considered consumer products. The repeated image reminds of Andy Warhol's icons, presenting a parody of US-American capitalism: "In doubling the image on one canvas, Warhol makes the viewer even more immediately aware that the image is a replicate by showing a copy of a copy. Warhol's works with reproductions of three or more images on one canvas reveal that this copying is potentially infinite, especially when there are dozens of the same image in one space" (Ganis). Walter Benjamin posited the same logic of simulation that is later celebrated by Warhol: "from a photographic plate ... one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense" (Benjamin). The similarity of the colors and the repeated image which looks like a series of products in a supermarket is convincing enough to affirm what da Rimini is trying to express, namely that girls are considered "dolls" when they are used as sexual objects in advertising, for example. The face of "doll yoko" represents *simulacrum* whereby a yellow circle symbolizes Asian origin. The notion of *simulacrum* seems to be inspired by Jean Baudrillard theory of *simulacra*: "The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production" (184). In our postmodern culture we are dominated by media: in television, films, and the internet we are constantly watching simulations of reality. So perverted are our minds that we are unable to distinguish between the real and the "hyperreal" anymore, as Baudrillard suggests.

Figure 3: "doll yoko" and Figure 4: "all history is pornography" & "laws are made by men who fuck their own daughters." Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright released by Francesca da Rimini to the author.



In Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962), like in "doll yoko" (Fig.3) the first picture shows copies of the same image of Marilyn Monroe. Warhol paid her homage by painting her repeated image in color trying to represent how people would remember her: splendid as a sexual symbol. The reproduction of her image is a metaphor of her condition as a "sexual object" which can be consumed, like the Campbell Soup Cans in his *100 Cans*. The second picture that Warhol painted showing Marilyn Monroe's image in black and white, distorted and burnt symbolizes how media pressure and journalists deteriorated her image and the consequence of stress which resulted in her suicide: "The Marilyn Monroe today's audiences still know and love is one based purely on the image and characteristics we can observe of her — and it's all that remains. What we end up with is just a mere copy, a simulation, an approximation of who she really was. Andy Warhol's silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe have come to serve as the perfect visual analogy for her enduring legacy — copy after copy is made, further and further from the original deep in the ground. It's the approximations and faulty copies that come to represent the original. Warhol's Monroe is realer to us than Monroe herself" (Markzipan). da Rimini echoes Warhol's example of *simulacra* with pictures of geishas: in one they are in color (see Figure 4), in the other they are in black and white and the image is blurred (see Figure 5). These two images symbolize the degradation of women who become ghosts because they are murdered (i.e., in countries where femicide is practised), ignored (i.e., when their contributions are not mentioned), sexually exploited (i.e., in children pornography and sex trafficking), or women who become a "value" of exchange (i.e., geishas):

Figure 5: "she is a salary ghost, ghosting for a living," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca Rimini to the author.



Moving back to *Dollspace*, once we click on "joindollyoko," we find an image of a closed eye and the sentence: "you enter deep dollspace zero" (see Figure 6). The word "zero" is used to represent women in cyberspace. da Rimini must be reflecting Sadie Plant's theory which states that in computer science women are "zeros" and men "ones." Women are "zeros" because their presence and discoveries are invisible in history books. Furthermore, women are "0"-s because the zero number is similar to the "O" vowel as in the Jacques Lacan "Other" (Plant 63). The closed eye may symbolize the fear to apprehend the real truth behind the story of these girls. Used in Luis Buñuel's film in *Un chien andalou*, the "eye" in *Dollspace* is a constant leitmotif in many of the websites, e-mails, and erotic short stories:

Figure 6: "you enter deep dollspace zero," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca da Rimini to the author.



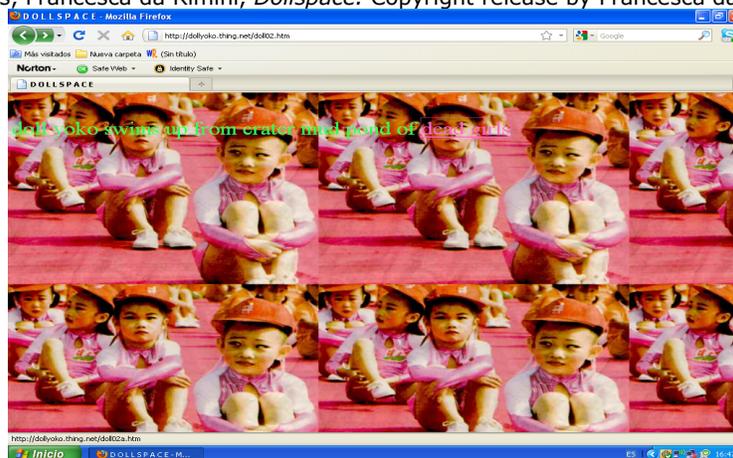
In other pages of *Dollspace* there is a peephole that leads into a different story; for example a man/voyeur watching a young Asian girl (see Figure 7). Through the figure of the voyeur, da Rimini criticizes the passivity of many audiences placed in front of the drama of everyday life. Since the late nineteenth century, reading and contemplating art has frequently been associated with voyeurism. Jean Baudrillard's reflections on the non-didactic nature of art take new meanings in the words of cybernarrative theorist Espen Aarseth: "The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur ... The cybertext reader is a player, a gambler; the cybertext is a game world" (4).

Figure 7: "Peep Show." Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca da Rimini to the author.



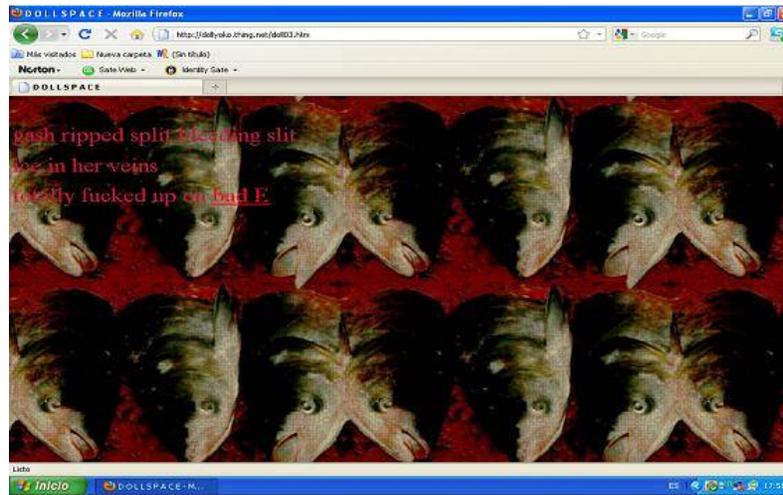
As with many online creations, whether digital literature or digital games, it is essential to take into account the interactivity of the user/participant. To a great extent his/her choice supposes a personal responsibility in following the story. By clicking on the eye, the user/participant enters a poem which da Rimini wrote in 1995, before the making of *Dollspace*. This poem is like a Russian doll from which all the other stories and e-mails emerge: stories of femicide, of gender violence, of rape, war, and revenge. The first image consists of *simulacra*-like depiction of a group of Japanese girls (see Figure 8): "doll yoko swims up from crater mud pond of dead girls ... She places her moss damp lips on yours and kisses you tenderly. Her pale hands perform gentle inquisitions upon your fleshform as she haunts your imagination, bruising your skin with her words" (*Dollspace*). Like the closed eye earlier, this beginning warns the user/participant about the shocking quality of the narrative, which contributes to "bruising your skin with her words" (*Dollspace*). The repetition of images and the position of the girls with their legs closed may be an intertextual reference to the pornographic cult film *Deep Throat*: Linda Lovelace's case because the position of all the Japanese girls opening and closing their legs is similar to the repeated image of Linda Lovelace in the cover of the film *Deep Throat*: Diana E.H. Russell writes in *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views of Pornography* that the actress of *Deep Throat* (Linda Lovelace) wrote in her testimony that she had been menaced with death during the shooting of the film. Thus, da Rimini might be comparing the situation of innocent girls who are victims of compulsory prostitution or femicide with the figure of Linda Lovelace.

Figure 8: Japanese girls, Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca da Rimini to the author.



A click on "dead girls" brings the participant to an image of several bleeding fish heads: "gash ripped split bleeding slit ice in her veins totally fucked up on bad E" (*Dollspace*). The contiguity of the metaphorical images quickly brings associations with female genitalia and mutilation:

Figure 9: "gash ripped slit," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*. Copyright release by Francesca da Rimini to the author.



Language switches suddenly from poetical discourse with romantic undertones such as "She places her moss damp lips on yours" to highly strong and sexually charged expressions: "totally fucked up on bad E" (*Dollspace*). This contraposition of discourse and register is persistent throughout the narrative and it is matched by the mixing of images, from real photographs to comic strips, pop-culture elements, collage, etc. Romanticized sections alternate with pornographic language and discourses of domination (i.e., military) and even gorish violence and sadomasochism. As the narrative advances, the user finds confessions of men and women who find pleasure in having sex with youngsters. In one, a "doll yoko" is raped by her father and brother, then buried in the garden. Her desire for revenge turns her into a split personality ghost with several names: "gashgirl," "profanity," etc. They write e-mails about torturing men: "we can see it in his eyes that he's begging for it he's dressed so provocative now in that blood" (*Dollspace*). Another speaker with the same name as the author, "Francesca," describes how she tortures and murders a man: "I killed the wolf today. Revenge never tasted so sweet" (*Dollspace*). Thus, the narrative shows how women, too, are capable of the most barbarian acts.

In conclusion, although all the stories end with associations of sex and death, the hypertext is a work in progress and has no clear ending. Some fragments point back to the beginning to haunting and trapping the user/participant in the web of stories and creating once more the uncanny feeling of *mise-en-abîme*. Because of these characteristics, *Dollspace* can be categorized as a "deconstructive cybertext." George P. Landow's assertion that the "rhizome can serve as an ideal for hypertext" (62) is very much true in *Dollspace*: it allows for multiple, non-hierarchical points of entry and exit, both in data presentation and interpretation. Scholars have claimed that hypermedia structures simulate effectively the associative connections and mnemonic networks of the mind, a dominant mediator of human consciousness in the construction of subjectivity. Thus, studies on material aesthetics and intermediality encompass a process of rethinking the notion of boundaries across material structures. This is clearly shown in da Rimini's *Dollspace*, where ambivalence cuts across discursive genres and distinct material formats of image, text, and audio. Hypertext engages the user/participant in a dialogue with the machine and, in the case of *Dollspace*, across people's sexual attitudes. *Dollspace* seeks to do more than to just shock the user. It wants to haunt him/her to become an intersubjectively embodied act, performed by the user/participant him/herself. It is a space where dolls become human, where reality and fiction intermingle, where the word becomes flesh.

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