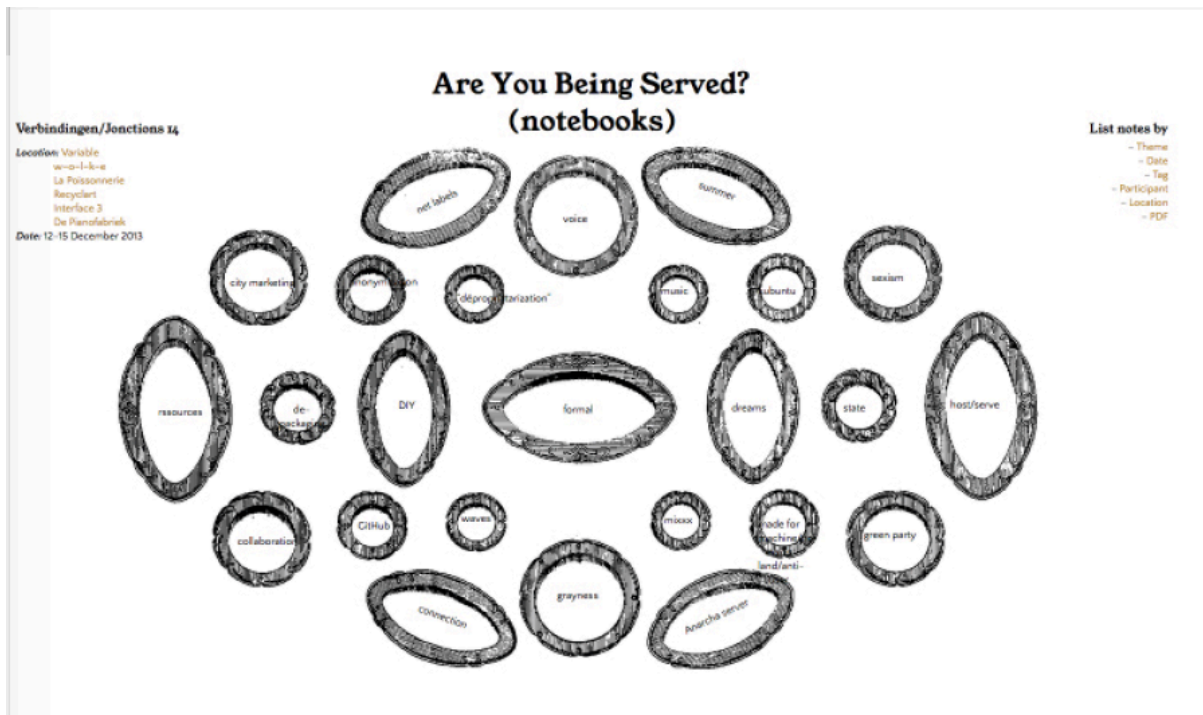


# Feminist Server – Visibility and Functionality: Digital Infrastructure as a Common Project

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Originally published in German as [Feminist Server – Sichtbarkeit und Funktionalität. Digitale Infrastruktur als gemeinschaftliches Projekt](#), in Springerin 4/2019.

*The discourse around digital commons focuses mainly on circulating resources and the communities forming around them. In specific artistic practices investigated in this text, another layer comes into focus: what began as an artistic project sometimes becomes infrastructure, and with that come new roles, dependencies, commitment and a lot of service work. Shusha Niederberger explores the often invisible layers of infrastructure in artistic and activist practices on feminist technologies.*



Constant: “Are You Being Served? (notebooks)”, 2015, Constant, Cover-Illustration

Anthropologist Brian Larkin defines infrastructures as „matter that enable the movement of other matter“ (Larkin 2013) and it is just as true for water supply as it is for a web server. This stratification of infrastructure and circulation is visible in many of the projects studied in our research: shadow libraries, for example, enable the circulation of texts and other cultural resources. Circulating resources are in the center of the discourse about digital

commons, extending from digital resources to the communities that have been forming around them, while practices associated with the infrastructure this circulation is based on remaining mostly unaddressed. And still, infrastructure is a crucial element in many of the projects we studied. What started as an artistic project became infrastructure, and with that come new roles, dependencies, obligations and a lot of service work.

### **The function of invisibility**

Why is the infrastructural level invisible, even in commons discourse? The pioneer of Infrastructure Research, Susan Leigh Star, argued that a characteristic of infrastructure is its disappearance behind its own functionality (Star 1999). And yes, it is not necessary to understand how the water supply works in order to be able to fill a glass of water. Only in the failure or collapse of infrastructure does become visible what infrastructure is: a whole network of things, practices of maintenance, relationships that regulate its creation and access, and also relationships among people connected to all these levels.

In our research, the question of infrastructure has been raised by projects with a feminist background, especially in the work of Constant, an artist-run organization in Brussels. In 2013, Constant hosted a workshop called “Are you being served?” to which artists and activists were invited to reflect on servers and services and the relationships to technology articulated through them (Constant 2015). During that workshop, participants formulated the Feminist Server Manifesto, stating an alternative mode of relating to servers and services. The manifesto declares, among other things: A Feminist Server is “a situated technology. It has a sense of context and sees itself as part of an ecology of practices”<sup>1</sup>. Feminist servers – and this can easily be extended to digital infrastructure in general – are defined here as fundamentally relational, embedded in social structures, practices and relationships. However, infrastructure is not only embedded in social structures but also serves as a structuring mechanism in itself (Wilson 2016). The invisibility of the relational nature of infrastructure supports its normative function. This point is key part of feminist epistemology, which emphasizes that invisibilities are constitutive for power relations (Harding 1987). And this means, that in order to challenge power relations embedded in infrastructures, invisibilities must be named. Star has used this methodological approach in anthropological infrastructure research, and she proposed to identify “the master voice of infrastructure” (Star 1999). And one of the master voices of digital infrastructure is the narrative (and expectation) of self-evident functionality. So, to be able to rely on infrastructure means its disappearance behind the functionality it provides. And it is important to point out again, that the invisibility of infrastructure does not primarily refer to

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<sup>1</sup> different perspective on the history of Feminist Servers offer [https://alexandria.anarchaserver.org/index.php/History\\_of\\_Anarchaserver\\_and\\_Feminists\\_Servers\\_visit\\_this\\_section](https://alexandria.anarchaserver.org/index.php/History_of_Anarchaserver_and_Feminists_Servers_visit_this_section) and Femke Snelling; <http://www.newcriticals.com/exquisite-corpse/page-8>.

its material dimensions, but includes all practices associated with its maintenance, as well as the relationships established with these practices.

### **Feminist Server**

The manifesto addresses Feminist Servers as a “thinking tool” (Sollfrank: 2018), allowing us to think about our relationship to infrastructure, and offering a feminist critique of technology. Feminist activism has taken this critique into action, implementing specific Feminist Server as running servers for communities around the world. Feminist Servers emerged from the specific needs of women, non-binary persons and LGBTI people, who have, again and again, experienced that the Internet is not a safe space for them, that the large platforms dominating the Internet since the early 2000s do not protect their content, their concerns and needs – neither from attacks by other internet users nor from access by repressive states. Feminist Servers aim at implementing servers as “safer spaces”. And in doing so, Feminist Servers go further than other activist initiatives for alternative digital infrastructures, that primarily aim at independence from commercial interests: Feminist Servers take into account the ideological dimension of infrastructure.

Currently, there exist diverse Feminist Servers, especially in Europe and Latin America (Spideralex 2020). They are operated and maintained by their users themselves, however seamless functionality is not their declared goal. As another point in the manifesto declares: “Feminist Servers avoids efficiency, ease of use, scalability and immediacy, as these can be traps.” Instead of walking through the door of seamless functionality into the trap of normative invisibility of infrastructure again, the Feminist Server activists want to make their servers a place that can be inhabited, that is: a place of shared practice.

Feminist Servers are therefore fragile, being transparent in regard to the conditions of production of running services. “A server is a service. This implies work and care, and it is illusory to think that it can always be free or that it can always be there for you, if you know the conditions necessary for a service to work,” says Spideralex in the interview with Claire Richard (Richard 2019). That the refusal to reproduce the invisibility of infrastructure goes at the expense of functionality, is, from a feminist perspective, not coincidence but intention. It allows the Feminist Servers to not become invisible again as infrastructure, but to remain a decidedly communal project.

The activists are aware of this tension. The last point in the manifesto says: “She tries very hard not to apologize when she is sometimes unavailable” [The Feminist Server is deliberately gendered as female in the manifesto, author’s note]. Spideralex speaks of this tension as an exchange: “You lose, and you gain other dimensions. And everything depends [...] on the needs of the people who inhabit the respective server.” (Sollfrank 2018) What is lost is the self-evident functionality and efficiency of infrastructure together with its

normative function, but in exchange, gained is a self-determined relationship to technology, a space to inhabit.

### **Commoning**

The circulation of digital goods is based on a digital infrastructure that is not self-preserving or self-reproducing. The feminist approach to technology of the Feminist Server Manifesto and also Feminist Server activism makes this invisible level accessible, hitherto neglected by the commons discourse.<sup>2</sup> By naming the connections, practices and relationships hidden by functionality, they can be addressed as part of commoning practices. And by questioning the primacy of functionality and efficiency, alternative relationships to technology communities may choose to become visible. “Feminist technology is incomplete if one does not go through all the layers”, as Spideralex said (Sollfrank: 2018). In other words, a feminist perspective allows not only to extend the commons discourse about digital technology, by putting the different practices connected by digital technologies into relationships, but it also allows these relationships to be changed.

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<sup>2</sup> This has also been the critique of Silvia Federici, with which she – unlike the Feminist Server activists – fundamentally rejects the possibilities of digital technology for the commons altogether (Federici 2010).

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