# HOT AND WIRED

**ART**

## XX cyberlinks and latex

### SKIDMORE

The scene is cool. A white, open space with several computer terminals linked by blue, flat-edge wires that lead them to the server like veins to a heart. A Cybermaid in red latex whizzes past for emergency assistance leaving an airy trail of blood-red plumes.

Catherine McGovern, Studio XX web mistress, programming coordinator and general superwoman, approaches like a friendly drill sargent. She sits me down, fiddles with the computer for a second then marches away to tap the side of some hardware like a trailer park television. Suddenly the scene has all the technological mystique of driving up a hill in my mother's old Buick with her rubbing the dash "come on girl."

But rendering technology accessible, by whatever means necessary, is a big part of the Studio XX mandate.

"XX is really about community building, whether it's in this physical space, amongst our membership, or virtual," McGovern offers. "Our approach to the web and technology is different. Maybe wanting to make it accessible, to help people appreciate it, is a feminist positioning, a women's thing. And that's what we're doing."

Two weeks into the second annual XX festival of women's web art, *Maid in Cyberspace – Encore!*, quips of what some critics perceive as a desire to isolate women on the web still hang in the air like a faint smell.

"I don't think that the Internet is a bastion of male activity," McGovern says, tweeking. "XX is not taking the stance that women are necessarily disadvantaged or poorly represented, or that the



**McCartney**

Internet is male. This is a celebration of women's creation."

Back in 1995 when Studio XX was a glimmer in the eyes of artist/academics Kathy Kennedy, Kim Sawchuk and Patricia Kearns, those might have been real concerns. Women were in poor attendance in technical schools and the Internet mostly conjured up images of boys playing games. The desire to gather women, rage against the
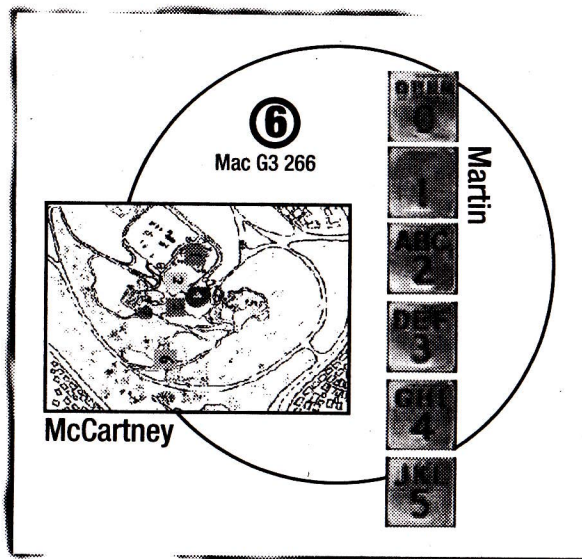
"hype" and "fear" of technology and get down to the business of cyberspace kept them going during the lean years of little real space and borrowed computers.

"It's insane how fast XX has grown," McGovern says teetering between exhaustion and enthusiasm. "Two years ago we were in that little closet on Berri Street, we hadn't received any arts funding, then suddenly things started to happen."

Good ideas were catapulted into action by the good timing of Internet growth and the importance of women using/ learning digital media technologies. Then came the continuing salon series, *Les Femmes Br@nchées*, monthly events that unite technophiles and phobes, juxtapose cyberfeminism and fun and get women informed and excited. Fast forward to the research project *Down to Earth in Cyberspace*, an investigtion into the needs of certain women's organizations, shelters and literacy groups in Montreal. Strategies were

developed to help them achieve their aims more effectively by using technology. And this is just a small taste of what XX continually has on the plate.

"The most demanding part is bringing together community, festivals, wanting to be more cutting-edge, merging the art and the technology, the theoretician concerns, with the pragmatic, okay, plug the thing in and make it work!" McGovern says blowing two feathers off the table, the remains of a feather duster now encirling us.

"You know," she leans in, "it used to be that the only conjunction of women, tools and sexy was big boobed, big power tooled babes on posters in mechanics' garages," McGovern says with a wily look. "Women with computers are sexy too. There's power in tech knowledge, but we like the costumes. For us it's important to keep the spirit of playfulness."