

Radical Living Archives and Trans* Embodiment

Shu Lea Cheang's Brandon

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Abstract Multimedia artist Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* was supported by the Guggenheim Museum New York in 1995 as a multiauthor/multi-institutional collaboration. Created in response to the news of the Nebraska murder of transgender youth Brandon Teena in 1993, the project exists as a feminist hypertext and as such can be regarded as a living archive of transgender embodiment. Due to the work's current offline status, questions arise as to how it might be factored beyond its material presence, as a temporal placeholder for radical and affective archiving. Major sociocultural factors such as the introduction of the information super highway at the time of the project's creation allow for a topographical look at how digital codes and online interfacing factor as potential forms of emancipation regarding transgender embodiment and performativity.

Keywords feminist hypertext, net art, living archive, transgender embodiment

New Years Eve, 1993–94, Humboldt, Nebraska, USA. The Humboldt Rescue Squad take a call from a distressed mother who has arrived at a local farmhouse to the scene of a crime. The first thing Deputy Ray Harrod sees upon entering the house is a young African-American man with a prosthetic leg slumped against the couch, entry and exit wounds apparent to his head. The flooded floor of the house leads Harrod to the scene of the second and third victims lying atop a leaking waterbed, one of whom is later identified as a young transgender individual known as Brandon Teena.

In 1995, after the public news of the Nebraska murders of December 1993, multimedia artist Shu Lea Cheang conceived of the project *Brandon* to coincide with a period of personal migration from actual to cyber space. Cheang was working with then curator of the Whitney Museum John Hanhardt in an effort to expand the museum into cyberspace. In 1998 Hanhardt moved to the Guggenheim Museum and took *Brandon* with him. What resulted from this period was a

multiartist/multi-institutional collaboration to be developed across various physical and virtual platforms over the course of a year. In conjunction with the development of five unique digital interfaces—Bigdoll, Roadtrip, Moonplay, Panopticon, and Theatrum Anatomicum—*Brandon* hosted two live interactive and participatory events. In coproduction with the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Netherland's Waag Institute for Art, Science, and Technology hosted the performative installation *Digi Gender Social Body: Under the Knife, Under the Spell of Anaesthesia*. In collaboration with Harvard University's Institute on Arts and Civic Dialogue, *Brandon* facilitated a netcast roundtable forum and virtual court system entitled *Would the Jurors Please Stand Up? Crime and Punishment as Net Spectacle*.

Cheang's extension of the project beyond a localized expression of transgender experience enables a consideration for how performative gestures might be figured as radical living archives.¹ Through the project's dispersion across a variety of disciplines and civic institutions regarding transgender bodies and politics, the project's archival dimensions proliferate beyond its material and virtual presence. Despite the project's conception as primarily a work of net art, the fact of its co-opting a series of physical spaces speaks to the need to expatriate a public's engagement with its politics on the ground. The public installment *Digi Gender Social Body* was located inside the Waag's Theatrum Anatomicum, a sixteenth-century anatomical theatre and one of Europe's leading stages for the rigorous learning of human-based anatomy. In this instance, the project's archival and affective dimensions became a clause for the embodiment of a heavily politicized Western medical tradition in direct relation to transgender bodies. Medical technology and transgender agency share a deep and proximal history, with many specialists expressing a profound mistrust in medical intervention with regard to the creation of transgender bodies and identities.² By direct implication of the host site's standing as a pillar for the advancement of the human sciences, *Brandon* enabled a renewed discussion on the body politic through means of a conceptual and textual dissection of the modern digital body. The forum—held in conjunction with the sixteenth World Wide Video Festival in Amsterdam—assembled a panel of specialists across gender studies, cultural criticism, and biotechnology to perform a textual surgical operation on the theoretical and constructed framework of techno-social bodies. Where the sixteenth-century body once lay in flesh and blood, the specter of the modern body was projected digitally onto the table from above. This performative gesture signifies a cohesive attempt at uniting the theoretical and corporal dimensions of transgender experiences so often absent from cross-disciplinary conversations.

Brandon can be thought of as an implicit act of self-conscious archiving, from its earliest inception to its current inert status and call for institutional

intervention (the Guggenheim Museum has been promising to restore the work back to the public online). Not only does the project offer an archival record of its objective nucleus—the heavily politicized and reported murder of Brandon Teena—but it encourages an unfettered and constructive engagement with its heavily exploited public narrative. The aggregation of artifacts such as actual courtroom documents from the Brandon Teena trial, together with public content uploaded during the virtually constructed courtroom, substantiate the project's claim as a dynamic living archive. In light of all this, questions around the project's agency are called into dispute when we realize that the material presence of the work is rendered inaccessible to a public online. How then might we think of living archives as existing beyond the reaches of visible and material instrumentation? How too might embodiment on a personal and social level be considered an act of radical archiving?

If we consider the role of the medium with regard to the message in historic terms, we can position the use of digital code and online interfacing for *Brandon* as a kind of zeitgeist. Cheang's use of hypertext and digital interfacing evokes the use of voice-recording devices during the women's liberation movement and of cameras during the civil rights movement. For *Brandon*, it is a heightened sense of the historic moment that transpires when we consider the liberating potentials of the Internet for transgender individuals during the time of its creation. *Brandon* is often cited as one of the first widely recognized examples of Internet art. At the time that work on the project had commenced, the Internet was on its way to becoming a household staple. As Eileen Myles calls to mind in her review of Qui Miaojin's *Last Words from Monmartre*, "one can't ignore the peculiarity of the moment of its composition, 1995, which might've been the last true analog year. Do you remember how 'it' felt before the Internet?" (2014). As a medium that sought to radically advance the relations of social precincts such as race and gender (there were high hopes for the new virtual superhighway and its alluding to the utopian vision of social egalitarianism), the potentials for new forms of art making and activism online were eagerly anticipated. As the subject of numerous media art dissertations, *Brandon* has been a work embraced with great enthusiasm, not only for its unprecedented approach to the medium of net art but also for what it sought to achieve in educating and making visible transgender experiences.

This project's unique contribution to the field of transgender studies can be regarded for its collaborative and nondidactic entry into the landscape of trans-phobia, social violence, and the criminal justice system. A lot of criticism has been voiced in response to the seemingly facile portrayal of the events surrounding Brandon Teena's life and death, as presented in the Hollywood film *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce 1999). Notable critiques of representational violence toward

transgender individuals include Judith Butler's (2010) response to the film's demonizing use of pronominal labels such as *lesbian* and the broader framework of debate instigated between queer theorist Judith Halberstam and trans theorist C. Jacob Hale in their essay exchange in *Butch/FTM Border Wars* (Halberstam and Hale 1998). In light of conflicting representations of transgender subjectivity, Cheang's *Brandon* has been a deliberate exercise in feminist hypertextuality, favoring a nonhierarchical and nonlinear slippage of its borders and narratives. Each unique interface was created as a mainframe and a launching pad to be developed through collaborative practice with designers, academics, scholars, and transgender practitioners. Each of the five interfaces is accessible by a myriad of entries and exits, with a lack of prescriptive narrative transpiring across them. The nonlinear approach to the site's navigation has been an overarching factor for how audiences are encouraged to consider transgender identity and sovereignty within a broader cyber-feminist framework.

For the Roadtrip Interface, Cheang invited transgender scholar Susan Stryker to collaborate as a scriptwriter and consultant. Embodied within the interface is an interactive plug-in that moves up and down a vertical highway. An androgynous hyperlink with the words *Brandon in transit* sits at the bottom edge of the screen. As you rest your mouse along the spine of the page—represented by the yellow markers of the highway—compressed images of poor quality flash up to offer a fragmented narrative of the moments that most ardently symbolize Brandon's transition from female to male: his relocation to Falls City. The link opens to a pop-up screen, yellow text on a black background. A firsthand account from a young woman who picked up Brandon along the Nebraskan Highway reads, "I had holiday money, a free heart, Springsteen's Nebraska playing on the car stereo, I had it all. I gunned it down the highway across the border and there I saw him, thumb stuck out" (Mcgregor 1998–99). In the last two paragraphs of the piece, the narrator appears to take on the voice of Brandon as if present from postmortem and pitched as our own moral conscience: "I wasn't trying to start a revolution, I didn't ask to be sacrificed, his voice rising now. Is this all my life was worth, to be used as a character in a tragedy of someone else's making? If this is my punishment, what was my crime?" (Mcgregor 1998–99).

Throughout many of the interfaces, speculative and fictive narratives between Brandon and various gender-queer personas interact. This imaginative, hypertextual engagement between characters allows a kind of liberation from the criminal overtones that otherwise dominate their public profiles. One of the overarching aims of the project is to unite in solidarity a broad spectrum of socially regarded deviants to draw attention to their autonomy rather than to their gendered obtuseness. Elsewhere in the Panopticon Interface, the system of organization is interpreted as cell spaces of 390×315 pixels intended for a

multiauthor collaboration. The play on the word *cell* is here twofold, promoting a multiscalar approach to the role of the archive in occupying real and virtual psycho-geographic spatial territories.

Where transgender experiences are largely erased from dominant narratives, *Brandon* positions them within a nexus of civic institutions, including the arts, media, medicine, and the judiciary. Although *Brandon* receives considerable endorsement from these social establishments, it assumes a hypercritical stance on the very ethical provenance that they harbor. With a long line of sensationalized media coverage and unjust criminal intervention behind Brandon's narrative, this project succeeds in confronting and working directly within the systems that perpetuate transgender oppression. Where it is debated that a vast majority of scholarly writing fails to speak to the real circumstances by which transgender people live, *Brandon* propagates a unique expression of transgender experience that is both creatively dynamic and pragmatically acute. The project doesn't aim to fulfill a place in the landscape of transgender work in order to fix anything *per se* but rather to provide a platform for discussion on its realities via an imaginative and affective circuit of pedagogy. Despite and perhaps because of the current obstruction to *Brandon*'s original material presence, this project substantiates a vast and ambitious claim for a socially embodied archive that exists beyond its role as a temporal placeholder.

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Notes

1. We should consider not only the various performative gestures that make up the project *Brandon* but also the *fictive production* of trans* embodiment as an example of a living archive. Here the trans* body itself can be figured as a historically ascribed archive, revealing the various stages of an individual's transformation through gender identity and embodiment.
2. Despite the marked differences across theoretical frameworks applied by trans* scholars Bernice Hausman and Janice Raymond, both share a deep mistrust of medical intervention on the body as discussed by Talia Bettcher (2014).

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