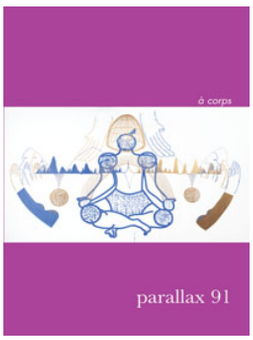

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Jeppe Ugelvig

> *What is distance? Two oceans under my forefinger.*
> *We are bodies in spirits* [esprits] *fast as the radio.*
> Hélène Cixous.[1]

> *[Brandon] was pretty much tied up in Nebraska, and I think in America people always say if you're queer, you are not comfortable in this country's state, you should go to San Francisco. But Brandon was never able to do that. So the idea with the* Brandon *project was teleporting Brandon onto the cyberspace.*
> Shu Lea Cheang.[2]

This essay is about a body; or rather, many (sorts of) bodies – or *corps*. It concerns itself with the body as it expands and moves beyond its so-called carbon-based materiality,[3] so as to invest varying stages of virtuality. Like the category of 'body', I employ the notion of 'virtuality' in all its polysemantic and ambiguous potentialities, so as to allow for new epistemological, technological, and political understandings of the term. My purpose is to examine the relationship between virtuality and corporeity in the so-called 'cyberspace', notably through the reading of a certain body, a laboured corpus, that of Shu Lea Cheang's web-art work *Brandon* (1998) and its recent restoration.

It is undeniable that developments of technologically produced virtual environments have challenged traditional understandings of body/ies, sex and gender. Feminist materialist thinkers have strived to account for these developments during the past decades, notably by attempting to theorize the status of the 'sexed body' in virtual environments. While they allow for novel and sophisticated ontologies of corporeity, sexual difference and gender, some of these readings – most notably, Elizabeth Grosz's – maintain a reference to 'the real body' to which 'the virtual' is subordinated, the latter being conceived as a mere extension of the former. I will argue that such readings fail to account for an 'originary virtuality',[4] or what Jacques Derrida calls 'a virtuality irreducible to the opposition of the act and the potential in the space of the event'.[5] This originary virtuality doesn't simply erase the difference between what we call 'the virtual' and 'the actual' – for instance, a 'virtual' body as opposed to a 'real' body – but precedes and exceeds it, complicating our reading and writing of such difference before and beyond the limits of what we call 'cyberspace'. This allows us to think an ethics of virtual

bodiliness, one premised on transformative survival instead of a life/death dichotomy. I examine these possibilities in the last part of the essay, engaging the concept of 'digital restoration' within art conservation studies.

Textual Encounters, Before and Beyond the Cyberspace

At the beginning of 1994, the Taiwanese-American artist Shu Lea Cheang came across two stories about violence on bodies – instances distinct not only in their nature and geography, but in their apparent materiality.[6] In Nebraska, news had broken of the brutal rape and murder of Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old trans man. Growing up in a conservative and hostile social environment, Brandon began identifying as male during adolescence and would variously refer to himself as intersex, hermaphrodite, or 'about to undergo gender confirmation surgery' in order to assert his gender identity. Moving to Falls City, NE in 1993, Brandon befriended several local residents and soon began dating 19-year old Lana Tisdel. On Christmas Eve of 1993, two of Brandon's acquaintances, suspecting his transgender identity (which was known and accepted by Tisdel), forced him to undress in order to prove to Tisdel that he was anatomically female. They would later assault Brandon, rape him in the back of a car, and force him to shower subsequently in order to erase any traces of their crime from his body. When filing charges, Brandon was met with transphobic abuse, his account discredited by the county sheriff, leading to no further investigation in the case. The sheriff persistently referred to Brandon as 'it', and questioned the reality of the crime because 'a woman trying to pass as a male was a lie too'.[7] A week later, on New Year's Eve, Brandon was shot dead by the pair along with his girlfriend, his girlfriend's sister and her boyfriend, at the latter's home. The atrocious story was widely covered in the media at the time and was later depicted in Kimberly Peirce's feature film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). Brandon was buried at the Lincoln Memorial Cemetery in Lincoln, Nebraska, his headstone inscribed with his disused birth name 'Teena Brandon', and the epitaph: *daughter, sister, & friend.*

Around the same time, technology writer Julian Dibell reported of a 'cyber-rape' having taken place in the online community LambdaMOO. LambdaMOO was the biggest of the so-called early MUDs ('Multi-User Dungeons') of the 1990s, which can be described as text-based, multiplayer, real-time chat forums that enable users to move between different virtual spaces (such as dungeons, living rooms, and bedrooms) as avatars. In these early MUDs, environments, actions and bodies were rendered entirely textually, allowing people to perform identities, appearances, and configurations of bodiliness solely through writing. This aspect made MUDs particularly popular amongst queer youths. It was in such a MUD that a player named 'Mr. Bungle', by running a so-called 'voodoo doll'-subprogram, started to falsely attribute actions to other characters, imposing hour-long descriptions of violent sexual acts, acts of self-violation and self-mutilation, or forcing individuals to have sex with him. Mr. Bungle's actions were interpreted as sexual

violations and incited outrage among the LambdaMOO community, who collectively discussed how such a crime could be prosecuted in legal or virtual courts of law.[8]

> 'Where does the body end and the mind begin?' young Quastro asked, amid recurring attempts to fine-tune the differences between real and virtual violence. 'Is not the mind a part of the body?' 'In MOO, the body IS the mind,' offered HerkieCosmo gamely, and not at all implausibly, demonstrating the ease with which very knotty metaphysical conundrums come undone in VR.[9]

These two instances of bodily violence – one 'real', the other supposedly 'virtual' – offer a challenging framework through which to think about corporeality, embodiment, and violence. The status of the body in virtual space has remained a much-disputed topic since the dawn of cybernetic theory in the 1940s. Initial cybernetic conceptualizations of humans as primarily 'information-processing entities'[10] were criticized for fuelling the dualist phantasm embedded in the Western philosophical tradition known to prioritize the mind and continuously ignore or try to 'do away' with the body. As N. Katherine Hayles has argued, central to this phantasm is the reasoning that 'because we are essentially information, we can do away with the body', a 'conceptualization that sees information and materiality as distinct entities. This separation allows the construction of a hierarchy in which information is given the dominant position and materiality runs a distant second'.[11] Despite the efforts of post-structuralist thought to undo the ontological divisions between mind and body, as well as between the real and the virtual, this phantasm still haunts contemporary discussions about electronically generated virtual space. Theoretical writing about corporeal virtuality tends to in fact focus on technologies of *dis*-embodiment, like VR, where a prosthetic bodily sensation is provoked visually via a screen – a technology that has most rapidly been capsized by the porn industry (and secondly, by art).

Drawing on communication theorists Howard Rheingold and Randall Walser, Elizabeth Grosz warns that VR has to do with the essential 'transparency, dispensability, or redundancy of the body – in other words, the capacity of computer technology to transcend the body'.[12] This form of disembodied self-containment, she posits – of *autogenesis* – bears an alarming resemblance to the phantasm of the self-made, male liberal subject, 'free of commitment, ties, and debt' – one that denies 'the linkage between the (sexed) body and the (sexed) subject'. Grosz continues:

> The idea that one could take on a second-order or virtual body and somehow leave one's real body behind with no trace or residue, with no effects or repercussions, is a luxury only afforded the male subject. That one enters cyberspace only as a

> disembodied mind, as neither male nor female, is a central assumption underlying the current enthusiasm surrounding VR.[13]

However, and somewhat paradoxically, Grosz's essentialist linking between (sexed) bodies and (sexed) subjects, and the correlative distinction between 'real bodies' and 'virtual bodies' in cyberspace, ends up reinstating the very mind-body dualism that she aims to dissolve. While her materialist ontology draws on deconstruction, Grosz seems to resist a certain deconstructive gesture targeting precisely the virtual-actual dichotomy.

In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida argues that technical supplements (of which the computer is only one example) challenge 'the discreet, discrete, and calculable multiplicity of the senses'; that is to say 'the assurance that touch is on the side of the act or the actual, whereas the virtual partakes more of the visual, with the appearing of *phainesthai*, that is, with the phantasm, the spectral, and the revenant'.[14] In fact, 'actual' bodily touch, Derrida shows, does not preclude virtualization, in so far as the body 'itself' is always-already marked by virtuality*:* bodily experience supposes the 'artifactual' production of 'local' realities inscribed spatially and temporally through tele-technologies of 'information'.[15] The artifactual (a term Derrida first coined in an interview in 1993, coincidentally the same year as the aforementioned crimes) 'haunts and works through both technics and desire'.[16] In spaces such as cyberspace – where the 'relation between thought, weight, language, and digital touch' goes through continuous technological mutations of scribing and ex-scribing[17] – our preconceived distinctions between mind and body, flesh and data, presence and futurity are quickly overcome. Here, actuality is revealed as not only *made*, but 'made of' (silicon cells, electronic signals, screens, written and read memory, code, as well as linguistic and psychosexual investments) and produced through processes of reading-writing: 'sorted, invested and performatively interpreted'.[18] Although the virtualness of corporeality may seem particularly evident in the context of electronically generated networks, Derrida shows through the notion of artifactuality that the virtualization of bodies and bodily interaction far predates the invention of the internet and of computational technology more generally. In thinking about the virtual violence on 'cyberbodies' – such as the ones found on LambdaMOO – we must not only account for an expanded corporeity supposedly rooted in a physical 'body proper' (its sensoral abilities extending into cyberspace through prosthesis or neuropsychological body phantoms[19]); we must also think of physicality as essentially enmeshed with the virtual, and of corporeal experience as resulting from textual grafting, involving processes of writing, reading, and rewriting of bodies.

Derrida thus points to a certain virtuality and cyberspatiality that is inseparable from the trace-structure, and from the irreducibly textual character of corporeity. 'Body', for example, is first and foremost a noun, an English noun, a common name intended to name an object or to translate an experience – one that we may call 'corporeal' – and to give it a name within one

relatively stabilized linguistic context. As such, it is essential to its functioning *as name* that 'body' may be repeated, learned and transmitted in order to be communicated, so as to be used in the absence of its referent. The possibility of this repetition, which may thus intervene outside its context of origin, is necessary so that the name 'body' may be understood as referring to its so-called 'referent' – what we call 'the body'. However, the necessary possibility of this de-contextualization is also what prevents the name 'body' from designating the very thing, the singular experience it is supposed to designate: 'body' is not a proper name. In 1982, Derrida wrote: 'Today, one often says "body" with the same degree of credulousness or dogmatism, at best with the same faith as, previously, one used to speak of "soul" – and that turns out or amounts to be nearly the same thing'.[20] 'Body' is, in this sense, an *improper* name.[21] In naming, it substitutes itself for the very thing that it designates, the singular and heterogeneous corporeal experience to which it supposedly refers, and which finds itself erased and supplemented by the very effect of referentiality. Because the mark or remark of such experience necessarily supposes tracing and referencing, it is always-already taken within a system of differantial traces (that is, a text) to which 'body' pertains. Bodily experience, the body 'as such', is mediated through traces that remain to be read, deciphered and interpreted. There is no immediate access to the thing-in-itself, if 'immediate' means 'non-textual'. The English noun 'body' is but one possible word, a prosthesis, a *virtual* name that translates an experience – the experience of 'being' or 'having' a body (an experience which is, already in these words, enmeshed in textuality) – while remaining fundamentally inadequate, heterogeneous to it.

Writing (a) Body

Cheang encountered these stories about violence on bodies at a time when she herself was moving from 'actual space' to 'cyber/virtual space', claiming herself 'a cybernomad'.[22] With the stories of Brandon and the LambdaMOO cyberrape in mind, Cheang went down a rabbit hole of research on- and off-line. She explored histories of transvestism, non-binary and transgender identification from pre-Victorian times onwards; incarceration and forced medical castration of gender minorities in Europe, North America, and East Asia; she surfed early trans community platforms and secret outlets of the early dark-web selling body parts and prosthetics; as well as 'she-male' sex chat forums, where images of trans and non-binary bodies were bought and sold on self-administered websites; she read up on early hormone treatments; juxtaposed research on 'gender crossings' and on illegal border crossings by migrants; and amassed hundreds of articles, police reports, and court transcripts surrounding the rape and death of Brandon, as well as the subsequent trial of his two murderers.

The eventual outcome of these textual encounters was *Brandon*: a non-linear, browser-based web artwork existing on the permanent web domain http://brandon.guggenheim.org. Commissioned by the Guggenheim

Museum of Art in 1998, and designed by Cheang between 1998 and 1999, *Brandon* unfolds as a coded internet maze with five overlapping interfaces each programmed under one mainframe, allowing users to move in and out of these spaces in flux. The first interface encountered when visiting *Brandon* is *bigdoll*, a dynamic puzzle of texts and image fragments depicting various signifiers of gender and bodies/bodiliness, including medical prostheses and anagrams, nipple piercings, flowers and fractured news headlines ('EXPOSURE' – 'SWAP' – 'DEATH ENDS POSE AS MAN') taken from Cheang's archive of research. Collectively, these fractions figuratively form a sort of total prosthetic body; a body entirely constituted by prostheses, forever-changing as the cursor hovers across its mutable skin. A hidden passage through the puzzle (which otherwise appears as a static page with no further hyperlinks) leads users to *roadtrip*, where a continuous flow of texts, links, and images – including road signs, photographs, the words 'BRANDON IN TRANSIT' – unfold along the broken yellow line of an electronic highway. Hovering with the mouse across these fleeting icons triggers several pop-up windows, which lead the user to sub-chambers of research about Brandon's murder as well as several other histories of trans violence and death spanning centuries, from Herculine Bambine (Paris, 1838–1868) and Jack Bee Garland (San Francisco, 1869–1936) to Venus Xtravaganza (New York, 1965–1988). Here, a live multi-author plug-in tool allowed for the writing of fictional narratives imagining Brandon meeting and interacting with these individuals across time on the 'electronic superhighway' of cyberspace. The next interface, *mooplay* was designed as a textual space hosting participatory forms of live narrative persona play: commissioned writers submitted short stories that would be re-scrambled when clicking on particular lines within the interface, effectively re-characterising their characters, including their genders, through the open-ended and malleable narrative logic of a chat room.

> i wanna live forever – i'm on the drug, My body.
>
> A body I had nearly forgotten inside.
>
> always becoming thrown off a cliff.
>
> ghost.[23]

Further still, *panopticon* was set up as another narrative interface, structured as a close-circuited virtual panopticon housing 'sexual deviants and prison inmates of various kinds' to function as both 'transient station and surveillance apparatus'.[24] *Panopticon* also served as prelude to the final and non-digital interface of *Brandon* at the Theatrum Anatomicum in Amsterdam, a former medical amphitheatre designed in 1691 for scientific experimentation. There, *Brandon* was used as a social and academic space over the course of a year, hosting a range of talks, conferences and events that were simultaneously broadcast online through the online artwork, including a forum on binary code and gender entitled 'Digi Gender Social Body: Under the Knife,

Under the Spell of Anesthesia'. Most significantly, Cheang organized the staging of fictional court-cases for gender violence online, in partnership with Harvard Law School; these performances of trials were collectively titled 'Would the Jurors Please Stand Up? Crime and Punishment as Net Spectacle', in reference to Sandy Stone's 1991 essay 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?'. The project speculated on the punishment of virtual criminality, including the LambdaMOO cyberrape as well the case of Jake Baker, an undergraduate student at University of Michigan who famously posted rape and murder fantasies about a classmate on the college's Usenet Newsgroup in 1994. These cases consciously troubled distinctions between the politics and metaphysics of life off- and online in order to outline an expansive way to think of an ethics of the body through the internet.

'Digiarchitexts'

In its dynamic and varying interfaces, *Brandon* can most easily be understood as a platform, an architecture: that is, a kind of space. As a work of art, it makes use of several virtual architectures and spatial metaphors such as rooms, roads, passages, cells, and buildings, while parts of it also existed as a carbon-based 'brick and mortar' architecture in Amsterdam. In fact, prior to realizing it in code, Cheang planned the digital construction of *Brandon* with architectural sketches, conceptualizing its infrastructure and spatial navigation as a sort of building. In her preparatory notebooks, she references *Brandon* as a '*digiarchitextual space*' – a term that provides a useful entryway into thinking about the intersection of writing, space, and materiality in the cybersphere. *Digi*, of course, refers to the digital, to electronic signals of information expressed through series of digits 0 and 1; *archi* to the discipline of architecture, to space-building in general, but also (from the Greek ἄρχω) to beginning, origin, and commandment;[25] *textual* to reading and writing, to any form of code or language supposing a text.[26] As a *web*-site, *Brandon* consists of approximately 65,000 lines of code and over 4,500 files (themselves coded), including a hidden archive of research material legible only through the website's code (conceived, perhaps, as a hidden cellar, a secret wall safe or a crypt within the site's architecture). In the same way that LambdaMOO was conceived by its users as 'a very large and very busy rustic mansion built entirely of words',[27] *Brandon* reads as a space built predominately through coding and other forms of space-writing.[28]

But *Brandon* also produces a different kind of spatiality: that of a body. Beyond understanding the information embedded in *Brandon* as a kind of body in its own right – indeed, a 'body of information' – the work furthermore signifies the corporeal through images of bodies and bodily prosthetics, through descriptions and discussions of bodies as well as through the sensoral/erotic staging of interactions between bodies. As an extension of this, we can understand *Brandon* as acting as one large, virtually unlimited prosthetic that produces, facilitates and mediates varying forms of bodily responses from its users, between users, as well as between users and computers.

Indeed, beyond matters of bodily representations, *Brandon* constitutes, in the words of Cheang, a 'Social Digi Body' – an expression which both suggests the facilitation of social interaction in the digital sphere through a body, or conversely, a body *produced through social interaction in the digital sphere*. It is no coincidence that this muddling between processes of space-making, relationality, identification and embodiment is characteristic of both cybernetic and posthumanist thinking. Media theorist Gene Youngblood, for example, has argued that 'space, too, must be understood as a *relation*, as producing a transfer, a connection, a set of interrelationships among often conflicting elements; it is closer, one might say, to the postal in the sense of a permanent, distributive production of social structures than to a closed box'.[29] Donna Haraway postulates that a cyborg imaginary involves 'the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic'.[30] Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingstone imagine the posthuman body to emerge 'where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context'.[31] These transfers of materiality and information between a body and an I, between inside and outside, the individual and collective, the private/public, the Self and Other, are facilitated via *interfaces* – technologies that mediate different virtual systems to each other.[32] *Brandon* can be understood to act as interface between a number of virtual bodily systems, from the corporeity of a single computer user to the social experience of collectively inhabiting/being a body.

Memorials, Spectres and Trans-lating the 'Body Proper'

There is another body, of course, that is signified by *Brandon*: that of Brandon (Teena). Through its name, the work cites and translates another body and duplicates it in cyberspace as an online architecture, a kind of *cybermemorial*. This translation is also a forceful displacement of a body, a transportation or, in Cheang's words, a teleportation. In an interview, Cheang explains that 'the idea with the *Brandon* project was teleporting Brandon onto the cyberspace'.[33] And, elsewhere, describing the *roadtrip* interface:

> The *roadtrip* interface is conceived to *upload Nebraska's Brandon onto the cyberzone* where he would surf across Nebraska's route 75, the nation border patrol, the linear timezone and the gender markings to encounter fictional persona play along the ever-extended, ever-expandable yellow dividers.[34]

Is this manoeuvre – liberating Brandon from gender discrimination and violence through cyberspace – possible? According to Grosz, all bodies 'are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural, and class particularities';[35] this irreducibility entails that, even in cyberspace, there can be no detachment between a sexed body and a sexed subject; nor can there be a 'liberation from the body, or from space, or the real. They all have a nasty habit of recurring with great insistence, however

much we try to fantasize their disappearance.'[36] According to Grosz, bio- and body-politics pertain to 'the real' even if they can manifest in virtual spaces such as cyberspace, in that they happen through body prosthetics or technological supplements. However, in insisting on this hierarchical distinction between 'the real' and technological supplements, Grosz preserves an ontological concept of the physical 'body proper', understood as the object of biopolitical power and ontologically inscribed in, for example, a gender identity. Grosz is explicitly aware of this 'risk': 'In using the notion of the sexed body as the frame for my analysis of (sexual) difference, I risk that ready slippage from a focus on difference to one on identity', she writes in her 1994 *Volatile Bodies*.[37] It is not certain that Grosz provides the means of preventing such 'slippage'. In fact, in the following development she reiterates this difficulty by distinguishing between 'sexual difference' and 'sexual identities', and by maintaining a clear distinction between what she calls the 'preontological' (difference 'as such') and the 'ontological' ('entity', 'identity', 'subject').[38] By anchoring sexual identity (or entity) in an ontology of the 'real', of 'sexed bodies', Grosz's materialist position conceives of subjectivity as fundamentally 'housed' in a 'physical', fleshy body – a body that can be 'hooked up to the machine' and connected to cyberspace, but which remains the originary body, a 'sexed' and only body, as if that body 'itself' was somehow free of technical, psychic and pharmacopornographic supplementarity.[39] As already mentioned, the motivations for Grosz' insistence on 'this body' is to resist the phantasm of masculinist autogenesis, to maintain the 'sexed' body as a category in the cybersphere.

But there are other issues with Grosz's gesture. First, cyberspace is not the *only* 'space' of virtuality, in that virtuality itself is not a place or a sphere, but rather an irreducible trait in writing all local realities. In this sense, Grosz ignores the 'originary virtuality' affecting any and all bodies. The category of the 'physical body' itself exists in a continuous process of virtualization, translation and simulation,[40] as *projected image*, a body-in-the-making, a body yet unnameable, a body to come. The 'physical' body (if we are still to make use of this materialistic division) – Brandon's, for instance – is affected with an irreducible virtuality in so far as it has to accommodate, over time, many heterogeneous technologies of embodiment and disembodiment; the many informations 'written' onto Brandon's flesh, for instance, through the names he was called and had to respond to; through the attempts at self-naming and renaming a complex and non-homogeneous bodily experience; and, in turn, the multi-layered and often contradictory interpretations of these names imposed on him or informed by his surroundings. Brandon's varying renditions of his sexual difference during his adolescence are themselves a testament to the artifactuality of corporeal experience, involving virtual technologies (starting with language and names) and producing 'local' realities inscribed in space and time. As Derrida writes: 'It is an artifactual body, a technical body, and it takes labor to constitute or deconstitute it'.[41] In this picture, 'the virtual' and 'the real' cannot be understood as mere opposites. Brandon's body, like all bodies, is a labor of love and translation – from one

moment to the next, from each encounter with oneself and the Other. 'Translation creates two things', A. Finn Enke writes: 'first, something new; and second, the illusion that there was an original from which the translation sprang. But there is no original: the poem is a medium, a conveyance'.[42]

Similarly, the (dis-)connection between the bodies of Brandon and *Brandon* is itself affected with virtuality, one that must be read and deciphered, instigated primarily through the (somewhat forceful) appropriation of his name (names, as Enke has described, have the very 'real' ability to produce bodies: social, institutional, legal).[43] Beyond his name, there are also many traces – spectral traces – of Brandon in the body of *Brandon*. In fact, references to Brandon's life, body, and death appear in every interface of the website, through writing, images and fictionalized narratives. However, as a cybermemorial, *Brandon* makes its own 'virtuality' overt, and does not aim to produce or identify a sacralized image of a dead body (in the manner that Brandon's 'material' tombstone aims to localize and re-appropriate him by identifying him as 'sister, daughter & friend'). *Brandon* doesn't strive to make the dead body 'present' nor attempt to reduce it to a pure origin, to a bodily subjectivity or identity. As such, *Brandon* doesn't erase the pain and violence that befell this body; rather, it (re)produces a body marked by violence, but also by survival. In doing so, Cheang extends the politics of sexual difference into the space of the cybersphere.

As a cyberbody, *Brandon* also proposes a new kind of body politics and a new politics of representation in that it is temporally and spatially unfixated – that is, forever unnavigable, unplacable, and unknowable. Indeed, *Brandon* consists of over 80 pages and popup windows, deliberately designed with no easy marked icons to help you navigate through the site. Cheang confessed that no one, including herself, has ever experienced *Brandon* in its entirety. There is simply no direct or easy way to exhaustively 'read' its body. This refusal to produce a cohesive, navigable configuration and representation (*of a body*) enables *Brandon* to challenge conventional bio-political discourse which persistently attempts to 'map' and ontologize bodies by naming not only their gender, race and class, but by marking their material limits (as opposed to what would pertain to mere virtuality). *Brandon* invokes a body politics of elaboration and proliferation across space and time, continuously virtualizing and actualizing 'sex' and 'gender' beyond the proper body understood as the originary signified. Without erasing the traces (and scars) of sexual differences, *Brandon* suggests a survival of what or who never fully comes into one's own, never reaches a resting place.[44] This process continues, as we shall now see, in the artwork's afterlife.

Restoring A Cyberbody

As all objects and artworks of the web, over the course of its life, *Brandon* began to fall into disrepair. Rapid change in web technologies in the work's 20-year lifetime had rendered many of its parts defunct as it was forced to continuously migrate onto new web browsers. Several of the work's pages were no longer accessible; text and image animations no longer displayed

properly; and many internal and external links were broken.[45] Particularly its heavy use of the now extinct Java Applets (an application within the Java programming language) made *Brandon* more or less impossible to access and experience using a modern internet browser. So, in 2017, The Guggenheim commenced the process of restoring the work in its entirety, the first attempt to do so to a browser-based artwork in the history of art.

Traditional art conservation has historically been understood to deal with unique, contained works of art once they 'break' – that is, when they start to degrade and their 'substances' begin to fail. In its conventional understanding, the process of conservation entails the analysis of a work's material and aesthetic condition, an examination of the technologies used to produce it (such as oil on canvas), and the intentions behind them. *Con*-servation (from Latin *conservare*, meaning 'to keep') can be defined as the means by which the 'original' nature of a work's body is maintained and preserved. *Pre*-servation, then, means to retard or to control in order to maintain this body in an unchanging state. But because all matter exists in state of slow degradation (some faster than others), these ideals are not really attainable, and conservation thus often entails an 'unhinging' of aesthetics from its physical properties, for example, by adding new paint to a canvas. Conservation ethics therefore dictate that any additions to an artwork's body must always be reversible, and that the original body be clearly delineated from these additions. Conservators must also document any treatment to an artwork, 'making any actions taken fully transparent'.[46]

These strategies are hard to translate onto time-based and electronic media in that the 'broken' artwork may have been stored in (as? on?) a particular material compound (such as a magnetic tape or as a digital file) that can only be experienced when 'played' through particular external devices such as video players or computers – all of which may have gone out of production long ago. Even in big museums, efforts are rarely made to stockpile these technologies, or to alternatively migrate these works onto other operating systems and technologies. Even if they do, the process of migration raises difficult questions relating to maintaining an artwork's 'original' materiality. The still-nascent practice of net art conservation has proved that computer-based artworks are particularly in risk of obsolescence – that is, exposed to death – in that the virtual environment in and for which they were made is constantly changing and always slowly being replaced. Conservators may decide to 'emulate' such an environment through the establishing of an artificial environment 'around' the artwork (such as old hardware or bandwidth) in order to preserve its original functionality – essentially, locking it in a particular technological space and time – or instead to alter it entirely by the creation and manipulation of a duplicate copy.

Working with a team of students from NYU's Department of Computer Science supervised by Deena Engel, Guggenheim's senior conservator for time-based media Johanna Phillips and her team spent months decoding and deciphering the body of *Brandon*. Upon inspection, the technical composition of the work proved to be exceptionally complex, making use of a variety of

web technologies and several programming languages – many of which had since gone extinct. They furthermore discovered that *Brandon*, as opposed to today's largely automatized coding methodologies, was written entirely by hand by Cheang and her collaborators. *Brandon* was 'born' to live on the World Wide Web, so rather than producing a virtual environment for *Brandon* to exist in, it was decided to create a duplicate version of the work that could exist in real-time online. To do this, defunct code was deactivated but maintained, and new, functioning code was added. Java Applets were replaced by GIFs, while outdated HTML was migrated onto CCS or resuscitated with present-day JavaScript. Although relying on new technologies, this made *Brandon* navigable and appear as it would have done in 1998. All changes were reversible and clearly identified *within the code* through *annotation*; a common technique used by programmers to add human-readable explanations of code functionality. The annotations identified the beginning and end of new code, as well as its author, date, and purpose on a line-by-line basis, so that future conservators and programmers would have a clear understanding of the interventions that were made.[47] After almost a year of work, the Guggenheim could in summer 2017 present a complete restoration of *Brandon* that fully resumed its programmed, functional, and aesthetic behaviours, once again accessible at *brandon.guggenheim.org*.

How do we understand this intervention – this incision – onto *Brandon*'s cyberbody? On a body that was, for a moment, considered 'dead', no longer accessible or 'present'? Can we, after this technical resuscitation, of reading, deleting, re-writing and annotating, understand the body of *Brandon* to be 'the same' – and to still be alive? As Derrida posited in *Of Grammatology*, the cybernetic emphasis on writing aims to oust metaphysical concepts – such as the soul, life, memory – in order to rethink the opposition man/machine and to instead expose, through the *grammè* (the written mark), textual elements comparable to any other set of data.[48] As Francesco Vitale has recently elaborated, this model was also adopted in biology to 'account for the genesis and structure of the living';[49] life defined here as that which makes the living distinct from the 'inorganic' through embedded DNA. In his reading of Derrida's unpublished seminar on the biological discourse, entitled 'La vie la mort', Vitale shows that Derrida sets out to verify the possible congruency of this model with his notion of 'general textuality' 'in view of a deconstructive elaboration of the relationship life/death, traditionally understood as a reciprocally exclusive opposition'.[50]

This différance between life and death has famously been explored by Derrida through the figure of the spectre. He writes that the spectre is 'the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other'.[51] As such, spectres are not subject to conventional bio-politics of bodies, but are concerned instead with *survival* – a concept that preoccupied Derrida up until the end of his life. In fact, in his last interview, Derrida describes survival as 'an originary concept that

Figure 1. Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. *bigdoll* interface. Courtesy the artist. © Shu Lea Cheang.

constitutes the very structure of what we call existence'.[52] As Vitale points out, the conceptual structure of survival allows us not only to complicate the life/death dichotomy, but also to 'reconsider the questions of writing and reading, of the translation and interpretation of texts and, thus, of the transmission of the legacy they represent for us':[53]

> A text lives only if it lives *on* [*sur-vit*], and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable [...]. Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living *on*, its life after death. The same thing will be said of what I call writing, mark, trace, and so on. It neither lives nor dies; it lives on.[54]

Figure 2. Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. *Theatrum Anatomicum* interface – design by Mieke Gerritzen. Courtesy the artist. © Shu Lea Cheang.

As a 'surviving' body (of text), a body of traces, of social, political, cultural and technological inscriptions, we might understand *Brandon*'s restoration as an additional kind of bodily translation, and thus, an inscription or re-inscription. This inscription implies a certain violence against the body but also, importantly, some care. The careful reading, translation, deactivation, and re-writing of *Brandon*'s code, conducted in the shared social space of a classroom, works through invading and incising the body of the work, virtually performing or performing virtual surgery on it in order to secure not its identical materiality (in this case, its code) but its future survival. Like the survival of all violated bodies, this involves the shedding of old skins as well as the formation of new ones: something is lost, something invented. But it does so by leaving a trace or a *scar* of the action to be remembered in the future, as a memory of the performed action on the body. As both Grosz and Derrida have reflected upon, scars – cutaneous signs, messages, or informations written on the body – allow for the construction of a biography, a history, *an archive of body/ies* – not only the violences and pains that have befallen it, but its subsequent processes of healing and survival.[55] Ultimately, this form of inscription *en abyme* extends or enlarges the body's textual *corpus*, producing new stories, new interpretations, new translations – now and in the future.

Through this operation, *Brandon* moves beyond only signifying the memory of *one body* (that, perhaps, of Brandon Teena), or constituting the mere

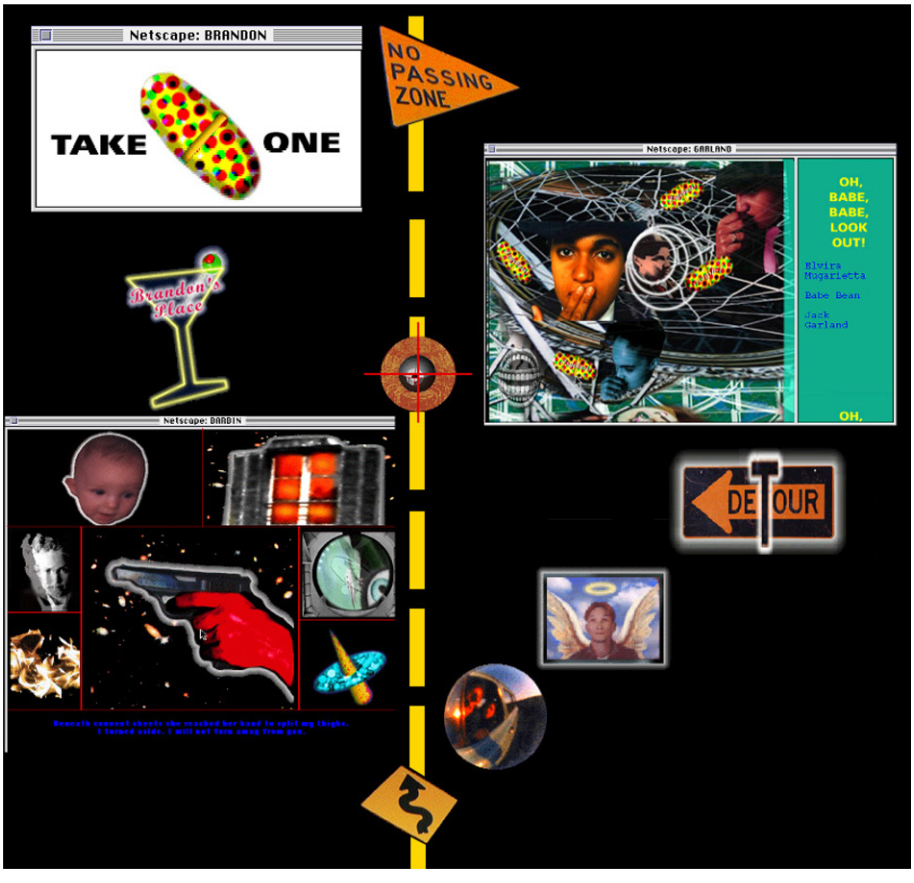

Figure 3. Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. *roadtrip* interface – design by Jordy Jones. Courtesy the artist. © Shu Lea Cheang.

medium, space, or platform of a web artwork by Shu Lea Cheang. It also serves as an archive of texts which, when read, carries the traces of a social and creative activity of new media conservation and queer mourning. It is a 'Social Digi Body' produced by relationality between humans and computers; and, because it is *text*, it already exceeds and survives the distinction between the two. Translated and re-written, *Brandon* survives as a 'reconstituted corpus', 'a body of information emerging from the discourse community among whom information circulates'.[56] As such, it is a body that will always demand the need for 'more context, more story', and remains open to future readings, readers to come – including those of this essay.

Notes

I would like to thank Ann Butler and Jon Hanhardt, whose seminar on video art conservation at CCS Bard spawned an early version of this essay. Thank you also to Johanna Phillips for generously sharing her story of restoring *Brandon* in this context. Thank you to Thomas Clément Mercier for truly invaluable support and guidance throughout the writing process. And lastly, to

Shu Lea Cheang for her patience and generosity. I dedicate this essay to Brandon Teena (1972-1993) as well as to David Buckel (1957-2018), lawyer and gay rights advocate.

[1] Quoted in Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say*, 100.
[2] Karin De Wild, "The Brandon Project: An Open Narrative."
[3] I borrow this expression from Hayles. See *How We Became Posthuman*.
[4] I borrow the expression 'originary virtuality' from Thomas Clément Mercier. See his account of Derrida's usages of 'virtuality' and 'actuality' (*dynamis* and *energeia*) in "We Have Tasted the Powers of the Age to Come."
[5] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 79.
[6] Ho, "Shu Lea Cheang on Brandon."
[7] Much of my research was realized by consulting the Shu Lea Cheang Papers (MSS 381), housed at the Fales Library, NYU. The archive is still unprocessed, and I am grateful to Marvin Taylor and Nicholas Martin for making this research possible.
[8] Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace."
[9] Ibid.
[10] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 7.
[11] Ibid., 12.
[12] Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, 42.
[13] Ibid., 43.
[14] Derrida, *On touching*, 300.
[15] Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," 28.
[16] Derrida, *On Touching*, 301.
[17] Ibid., 300.
[18] Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," 28.
[19] Lacan refers to an 'imaginary body' as an internalized image of the meaning that a body has for a subject. Grosz extends this through the notion of the 'body phantom', defined as the condition of the subject's capacity to adapt to but also to become integrated with various objects, instruments, tools, and machines through prosthesis. Both, however, imagine these bodies to constitute extensions of a 'real' (physical) body proper, the 'locus' of all human experience. See Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, 33-35.
[20] Derrida and Conley, "Voice II … ," 83.
[21] On this topic, see Crawford, "Samuel Beckett's Spatial Aesthetic of Name Change," 51.
[22] Ho, "Shu Lea Cheang on Brandon." The context was the mid-1990s, at the onset of cyberfeminism, sharing Cheang's interest in imagining a 'virtual world where race/gender does not matter any more' (Ibid). For a discussion of the movement, see Galloway's "A Report," Ptak, "When the Future Was Femail," and *Cyberfeminist Reader 2*.
[23] Cadigan, Chua, da Rimini, "mooplay."
[24] The Guggenheim Museum, http://brandon.guggenheim.org/credits/interface/panopticon/index.html
[25] This reference to 'archi-' may also be read as referring to the archival remnant. *Brandon* can easily be construed as an archival body. See Derrida, *Archive Fever*.
[26] The pun 'architext' was earlier used by French literary critic Gérard Genette in his 1979 essay *The Architext: An Introduction* – which, while not specifically addressing the discipline of architecture, reflects upon processes of textual construction and foundation-building in the field of poetics.
[27] Dibell, "A Rape in Cyberspace."
[28] Throughout this essay I consciously employ architecture as both metaphor and as practice, drawing on Derrida's employment of architecture in his writing on metaphysics and deconstruction. As Mark Wigley explains, the tradition of metaphysics has always understood itself through architectural metaphors, and it is within the literalness of this metaphor that Derrida's writing is most efficiently mobilized. "As the tradition of metaphysics is the definition of architecture as mere metaphor," he writes, "any disruption of architecture's role as a figure is already a disruption of metaphysics." This process disrupts and complicates the line between discourse and materiality as defined by institutionalized discourses of philosophy and architecture – particularly with regards to virtual space. See Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, 30.
[29] Youngblood, "A Medium Matures," 66.
[30] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 170.
[31] Halberstam and Livingstone, *Posthuman Bodies*, 2.
[32] For a critical exploration of the notion of 'interface', see Hookway, *Interface*.
[33] de Wild, "The Brandon Project: An Open Narrative."
[34] Cheang, "Roadtrip Interface for Multi-Author Upload." My emphasis.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, 18.

[37] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 208.

[38] Ibid, 209. In recent years, Grosz has moved further away from deconstructive motives, and closer to a Deleuzian ontology of immanence and virtuality. See Grosz, *The Incorporeal*.

[39] This claim has been challenged by various thinkers in the last decade. See for example Preciado, *Testo Junkie*.

[40] Even the common distinction in cybernetics between 'physical' and 'virtual' bodies, between flesh and data, still subliminally subscribes to the idea of an originary body through the concept of the 'physical', of the physicus (φυσικός), meaning the natural, that which is pre-cultural or pre-discursive.

[41] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 213.

[42] Enke, "Translation," 242.

[43] See Enke, "What's in a Name?" There is a certain violence inherent in Cheang's artistic gesture, and I want to clearly acknowledge this. While *Brandon* functions as a queer memorial, it was produced without the consent of Brandon or his friends or family. As an artwork, it furthermore exists within an industrial complex premised on ethically dubious economic, institutional and political systems, where bodies are constantly appropriated, commodified and capitalized upon. Certainly, this complex involves the artist, curator, museum director, collector, audience – as well as, of course, the art historian. In a different essay, we may ask: what are the ethics of appropriating bodies (dead and minority bodies in particular) in the context of art? On this topic, see for example English, "Emett Till Ever After."

[44] Enke writes: 'Transgender demands above all the need for more context, more story, and thus the translation into transgender never arrives and rests.' See "Translation," 244.

[45] Phillips et al., "Restoring Brandon."

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9. As his note on Wiener shows, Derrida does not believe that cybernetics fully achieved this deconstruction of metaphysical concepts (see note 3, p. 324).

[49] Vitale, *Biodeconstruction*, 2.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 5.

[52] Derrida, "Learning to Live Finally," 96.

[53] Vitale, *Biodeconstruction*, 196.

[54] Derrida, "Living On – Borderlines."

[55] "Each layer here seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound, permitting glimpses of the abyssal possibility of another depth destined for archeological excavation," writes Derrida in *Archive Fever*, 20. His book speaks poignantly about the practice and ethics of conservation. See also Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 138-144.

[56] I borrow this phrase from Hayles and her analysis of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, in *How We Became Posthuman*, 42.

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