

MOTHA

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35 SHU LEA CHEANG, BRANDON, 1998-99



Hyper-Cruising in the Cyber-Erogenous Zone

In 1998, Taiwanese American artist Shu Lea Cheang conceived and executed *BRANDON*, the first net art commission by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Over the course of one year, Cheang created and orchestrated interfaces to probe the way transness interfaced with the history of sexuality, legality, and nascent web technologies. What initially began as research into the case of Brandon Teena, a Nebraska trans man who was sexually assaulted and killed in 1993, evolved into an expansive, multi-author project comprising five interactive web portals and public programming events.

Constructed like a click-based adventure game, *BRANDON* was a collaborative effort to map Teena's elusive trans body onto interlinked web pages and memorialize him. At a time when trans and nonbinary identities were far from visible in the public realm, it invited users to inhabit what Cheang calls the "digi-social body" by way of navigating institutionalized structures of knowledge as a form of game play while celebrating the eroticism imbued in gender and sexual nonconformity.

In the first of the five interfaces, the "bigdoll interface," the user moves the computer mouse to reveal and shuffle a grid of images. From anatomy diagrams to masculinity markers, sensationalizing media headlines to strap-on dildos, Brandon's trans-masculine body takes fluid, composite form. Completion of the bigdoll interface jumpstarts the "roadtrip interface," an animated highway decked with GIFs and hyperlinked popup windows. In this fantasy of a trans*ient queer hyper-cruising Nebraska's Route 75, the user's mouse click activates imagined flirtatious encounters with American and European trans icons, including Herculine Barbin, Jim McHarris, and Venus Xtravaganza, delivered through texts, imagery, and erotic mapping. Morphing with each user interaction, the body literally escapes legibility.

In addition to uploading Brandon to fantastical cyber-erogenous zones, the roadtrip interface functions as a central spine for *BRANDON*, further linking out to the "mooplay," "panopticon," and "Theatrum Anatomicum" interfaces. Popular in the 1990s, mooplay refers to *Lambdamoo*, a text-based virtual community where users could construct fictive avatars and explore gender variability.

Narratives written by commissioned writers are scrambled and displayed in various colors and font sizes. Clicking on hyperlinked unknown genders—such as don-monster, Snakeboy, junkie—launches a chatbox that simulates gender-coded chat environments in online communities like *Lambdamoo*.

Throughout the navigation of *BRANDON*, pop-up windows featuring neon-colored pills continuously interrupt: "Take one." "Take two." Each corresponding to the five interwoven interfaces, these "sugar-coated theory pills" take the user on a dizzying, revelatory high.¹ While previous interfaces employ random sampling and poetics to explore the recombinant social body in cyberspace, "panopticon" and "Theatrum Anatomicum" deploy social-architectural metaphors to illustrate how institutions manage and control perceived sexual deviancy and gender nonconformity. Borrowing from the eighteenth-century prison designs of Jeremy Bentham and tiling them into GIF art, the "panopticon interface" instantiates virtual prison cells that measure 390 by 315 pixels. Links embedded in each window trigger a new window, forming an archaic loop of discipline and punish.

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam writes that "transgender bodies have come to represent new frontiers for state recognition, social tolerance, and flexible norms."² As a prefix in gendered contexts, the term "trans" attaches itself to whatever that follows, breaks open categories, and opens alternative conditions and possibilities for living. Cheang's complex vision for *BRANDON* precisely understands the trans body as a frontier that is always shifting, one that is always subjected to technical, juridical, and discursive forces. Looking at *BRANDON* now, the sugar-coated pills are time capsules, revealing a socio-techno cross-section surrounding the trans body; they are also hallucinogenics for the present and future: take a few and dive into the cyber-erogenous zone.

—Banyi Huang

◀
Shu Lea Cheang,
Screenshots of *BRANDON*,
1998-99. Interactive
networked code (html,
Java, Javascript, and server
database), Solomon R.
Guggenheim Museum,
New York, 2005.44

1. See <http://brandon.guggenheim.org/gifts/>.
2. Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 49.