

# Brandon: A One Year Narrative in Installments

Concept and direction by Shu Lea Cheang

Curated by Matthew Drutt, Associate Curator for Research, Guggenheim Museum

Produced in association with:

Society for Old and New Media

Caroline Nevejan and Suzanne Oxenaar / curators;

Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue

Anna Deavere Smith and Andrea Taylor / directors

Banff Center for the Arts

Sara Diamond / director of media arts

BRANDON is part of a broader program in the media arts being led by John G. Hanhardt, Senior Curator of Film and Media Arts at the Guggenheim Museum.

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## Content Warning

*Brandon* contains nudity, graphic descriptions of sexual violence, surgical imagery and some transphobic content.

## Overview

Shu Lea Cheang's early web artwork *Brandon* was created between 1998 and 1999 by the artist in collaboration with members of San Francisco's trans community. It was one of the first artworks to be commissioned for the World Wide Web, and to be collected by a major museum. Cheang conceived of the work as a 'multi-artist/multi-author/multi-institutional collaboration' which deliberately takes its visitors on a complex and variable journey through five interfaces of the website. Each interface explores how trans people have grappled, historically and in contemporary society, with societal and legal forms of discrimination.

Brandon was named after Brandon Teena, a trans man who was murdered in 1998.

There is no sense of a linear narrative within Brandon. Visitors can roam the website as they please and unveil new areas every time. Pop-ups frequently appear throughout interaction with the site, sometimes with sound effects added. Your journey through the site is likely to be messy and tangled, as Cheang and her collaborators intended!

## The *bigdoll* interface

*Javascript by Cherise Fong*

*bigdoll: Jordy Jones*

The first interface visitors encounter is known as *bigdoll*. Jordy Jones, a trans activist, artist and academic brought together a collection of images and texts that display randomly each time a visitor accesses the interface. These re-shuffle with each refresh of the page and therefore create a unique experience each time. Some of the images presented in this interface were created by other artists in contact with Jones. Others, such as found newspaper clippings, reflect the ignorant and inflammatory language which was used to describe Brandon Teena's gender identity in the coverage surrounding his death.

Dragging the mouse around the screen causes more images to appear, while clicking on the images causes them to disappear. Behind the tiles a composite image of a mechanically reconstructed knee is revealed. Clicking on this leads visitors into *roadtrip*.

## The *roadtrip* interface

*Jordy Jones / art design & script*

*Susan Stryker /script & consultant*

*Kimberly Saree Tomes /production*

*Javascript by Cherise Fong with Linda Tauscher*

*Roadtrip* is the backbone of the website. Visitors surf along a cyberspace version of the Route 75 Highway in Nebraska, with images and symbols appearing and moving across the screen. This interface makes visitors aware of how Brandon Teena's story fits into the wider narratives of the lives and deaths of trans people. Pills periodically pop up on the screen, advising visitors to 'TAKE FOUR' or 'TAKE ONE'. Photographs are scattered along the broken yellow lines of *roadtrip*, which visitors can click on to be led to other interfaces. Some of the photographs provide further context on stories of individuals across history with fluid gender identities.

Herculine Barbin, an intersex person who lived in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France, was assigned female at birth and legally declared male in the later stages of her life, although she continued to identify as a woman. James McHarris was a Black trans man who lived a mostly stealth life in the Midwest of the USA during the 1950s. Venus Xtravaganza was a trans woman who performed for the underground ballroom collective House of Xtravaganza during the 1970s and 80s in New York City, and Babe Bean, also known as Jack Bee Garland was a trans man who travelled with the United States Military to the Philippines in 1899, as a language interpreter and nurse. The artwork's namesake, Brandon Teena, moves through *roadtrip* in virtual dialogue with these people.

## The *mooplay* interface

*Text by Pat Cadigan, Lawrence Chua and Francesca da Rimini*

*Mooplay* is named after the text-based, networked systems known as MOOs which appeared in the early 1990s. MOOs functioned as an early 'group chat' of sorts, comprising of a virtual server which hosted multiple users who could all interact through text. Role-playing via user-created characters was a popular activity on these MOOs.

In this MOO writers Cadigan, Chua and da Rimini role-play as ten fictional characters with names such as 'snakeboy', 'dolyoko' and 'donmonster'. The transformative, genderless and/or gender ambiguous nature of assuming a virtual persona is evident in this chat, which re-shuffles with each refresh of the page.

## The *panopticon* interface

*Beth Stryker on concept & construct*

*Auriea Harvey on art design & coding*

Clicking on one of the elements in roadtrip takes visitors to *panopticon*, an animated interface which simulates the eighteenth century Panopticon layout envisioned by social theorist Jeremy Bentham. Designed for prison complexes, the Panopticon comprised of a massive circular, multi-storeyed room filled with rows of prison cells surrounding a central guard tower. The layout enforced mass constant surveillance over every prisoner in the building. This design was used for a number of prison complexes worldwide, including the Koepel prison in the Netherlands which was a direct inspiration for Cheang's simulation.

This early example of mass surveillance links to Cheang's exploration of how sexuality and gender identity have been regulated by medical and governmental institutions, with clickable areas of the interface bringing up images related to the invasive and harmful 'treatment' of non-conforming gender identities and sexualities. Clicking on the cells reveals the six prisoners who populate the wards of Cheang's panopticon, all awaiting medical procedures.

## The *theatrum anatomicum* interface

*Design: Mieke Gerritzen and Janine Huizenga*

*MorF title animation: Yariv Alterfin*

*Software engineer: Roos Eisma*

*Forum programming: Bram Boskamp*

*Theatrum Installation Installation: Joep Van Lieshout*

*Construction: Atelier van Lieshout*

*Documentation: Derk Jan Wooldrik*

This interface leads visitors into a virtual dissecting table from the seventeenth century, recalling the early operations which took place in front of audiences. Clicking different areas of the page takes visitors to documentation of the live performances related to Brandon which took place in the late 1990s.

In 1998 The Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue at Harvard University hosted the first performance, a virtual simulated court case led by Cheang, where public internet users were invited to preside on six simulated trials pertaining to real and virtual crimes. Scholars and legal experts including Kendall Thomas and Lawrence Lessig were directly involved in this event. Some of these trials were linked to real life recent cases, including the wrongful death suit which Brandon Teena's mother brought against the local county sheriff in his hometown (Brandon v. County of Richardson) and an earlier case of a trans woman, Chanelle Pickett, who was murdered in Watertown, Massachusetts in 1995 (Chanelle Pickett v. William C. Palmer), among other cases. Real court

documents, evidence and testimonies are presented on this section of the interface, but Cheang did not conclude these simulated trials with any sentencing. The event was exploratory in nature rather than conclusive.

The third and fourth live events were staged simultaneously in a historical seventeenth century operating theatre in Amsterdam (now the Society for Old and New Media, De Waag), and and the SoHo branch of the Guggenheim Museum in the United States. Linked via audio and video streams which were simulcast on theatrum anatomicum, the third event in 1998 was a forum titled 'Digi Gender, Social Body: Under the Knife, Under the Spell of Anesthesia'. Scholars of media theory and LGBTQ+ studies, including Susan Stryker, verbally 'operated' on the concept of a digital gender as images from sexual reassignment surgeries were broadcast on the screen behind them. The interface presented in theatrum anatomicum was replicated into real life in this setting, with rings and a suspended operating table.

The fourth event 'Would the Jurors Please Stand Up? Crime and Punishment as Net Spectacle', held in 1999 simulated a virtual courtroom where internet users could 'apply' to become jurors via a questionnaire. This event drew largely on the earlier Harvard University event's simulated court trials, and further challenged participants on their perceptions of identity, gender and violence in cyberspace. A virtual world, still viewable within theatrum anatomicum provided the setting for this event and drew on connections between the medical and legal systems, social attitudes and violence as they intersect upon gender identity.

All four live events, held in the early years after Brandon's release, largely still exist within the theatrum anatomicum interface. Material and virtual set ups from each event can be found by interacting with elements on the opening interface's page. These events were an important component of activating Brandon further, and for developing discussion around how institutional and social violence has impacted people with non-conforming gender identities and members of transgender communities across written history.

Brandon is a live internet website so feel free to explore any time!