Axel Roch

Critique of Mediation through
Art as Polycontexturality

"Ich wuensch mir nach all den Jahren
einen neuen Strich im Traum" *

Barbara Morgenstern

Watch out ! Using media is dangerous. According to Martin Heidegger and his philosophy of technology, media are appropriations of an arbitrary but agonistic will to power, appropriations of a dynamic struggle towards being able to lead or to stay in power. Once media have become social, cultural, economical, or technical standards, a genealogy of these electronic standards as conditions of communication exposes too often how such media have come into being through a differential and relational play of power forces. Since Heidegger's re-reading of Friedrich Nietzsche, post-war critical thinking adapted this important method in critique, a historical and archaeological analysis of an object in becoming is a necessary step towards the critique of the very same object, whether it is society, science, technology, architecture, or art.

Yet, this common type of critique bears a problem that is not only challenged by the old dictum of Karl Marx to understand and change the world at the very same time (Theses on Feuerbach), but also by the very potentiality of contemporary media. Critique, and with it the philosophy of new media, is not only mostly negative, it is also, and

that is far worse, passive. There is a dilemma in classical analysis and philosophy. Critical thought is studying being, it does not change being, it might be analytical, but it fails to be performative, operational, or transclassical, it is either theoretical or practical, it cannot be both at the same time.

Actually, this very same problem every individual in society faces almost every day. As a user of society, through consumption, through work, through being simply alive, we need always submit ourselves towards structures that are present, in order to participate. Even if we give ourselves a new identity through consumption, such as purchasing clothes, we can choose various shopping facilities, but in the end we do not only get our ideas from media, we also need to accept the offered choices. In almost all micro-instances we don't introduce choice as change into everyday life, we mostly select from alternative choices. Not only media, therefore, even life as such is dangerous. It is very difficult to be strictly critical and to be alive at the same time, not to submit oneself to power. "Dumb-ed in capitalist society, we enjoy being programmed", Shilpa Gupta states. One falls always back into the trap of

history as a mimicry of power in the present. It is difficult to mediate between active choices and passive selections in almost all instances of our life. We cannot, to put it very simple, eat and cook, contemplate and create, consume and produce at the very same time. But this is what media and art even in its political dimension actually is promising to us, to participate actively, to be interactive !

Now, within new media the question of politics through identities is more complex. Electronic media are not only a historical mixture of science, technology, but also of mathematics and logic, frozen moments in a dynamic and ever changing play of relational forces also as formal identities. Structures of micro-power prevent us from making many different choices while using media. We can select between different options and possible time-based data, but we cannot alter the identity of software or media art work while experiencing it. Power is present and reiterates itself through micro-identities, scattered through all level of engagement in media usage and production. The dialectical critique of information and cybernetics would phrase: new media are monocontextural.

Alan Turing, a co-founder of computation in the struggle with basic problems in foundational mathematics and with his counter-measure against radio secrecy in World War II, would remind us that algorithms currently don't change their method of computation while computing or while being used. The so-called c-machines, or choice-machines, interact with users while computing. These envisioned mechanisms change their identity during execution, they haven't found their way yet into

software, media culture, and art, in sharp contrast to a-machines, machines that process input, but do not alter their operation depending on these inputs. Software doesn't change while being used. An image-processing program doesn't "become" an animation program while being used. Any user is, unfortunately, equally to data, exchangeable. Information is not alive. But finally, at least in art, what we want is subjective computation. We want media adapting and changing themselves towards local and cultural memory, rather than just storing, capturing, and processing it. Wouldn't art try to mediate either a critical process of subjectivation, an imaginal experience of the artist to the viewer or listener ? The question, therefore, is: if electronic media are reiterating structures as identities, how can a user, a viewer, or even an artist not be submitted towards repetition and loops of micro-power in operation ? How can an art work become in the sense that an experiential quality of reflective and critical production is not only mirrored through power, but as a chiastic interplay of art work and spectator, media and user, system and observer ? How can, basically, subjectivity unfold itself through media ?

Shilpa Gupta offers a play of difference through identities. In respect to interactivity, her art works also bear a concept of interaction that is not based on manipulation and control, but more on invitation, suggestion, and critical participation. Art is not only exposed as new, intensive, or inter-relational experience in time and/or space, critique is not only articulated as a diagrammatic cartography of power. Shilpa Gupta overcomes the trap of representation through a complex play with multiple and
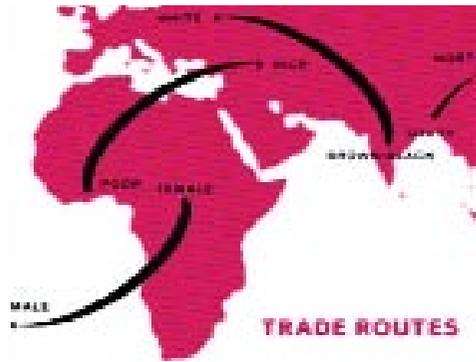
opposing identities mediating between spectators and artist through the actual art work.

In her web-based installations, like DiamondsAndYou. com (2000), Sentiment-Express.com (2001), and, of course, also in YourKidneySupermarket.com (2003), an extension of the walk in environment in public spaces the user of the web-site is tricked into a comfortable consumer environment, being able not only to specify her or his wishes, but also being able to place an actual order online and right away, for a product that seems to be a common cultural desire. The art work first establishes an identity with the viewer in the context of consumerist behaviour and fetishised commodities. Slowly, in some cases more and more dramatically, the various graphical user commands reveal the actual conditions to produce the product. The user, in order to proceed, needs to choose with consciousness within the social and human perils that are involved producing these desired commodities.

YOUR KIDNEY SUPERMARKET, 2002
Interactive Installation and Video

The street shop window displays stickers saying 'Your Kidney Supermarket'. On entering inside, the environment is saturated with green light. Kidneys made of sugar and glucose are suspended in transparent acrylic cases placed on steel stands. There is a comfortable pink sofa in front of a television monitor. The visitor can choose kidneys based on not only shapes, sizes and colours, but also Trade Routes- from South to North, Brown/Black to White, Poor to Rich and Female to Male. S/he can take a sugar kidney in a kit containing tea leaves, a piece of cloth, some sugar and a brush. This comes along with an Instruction Manual (top right) and a Trade Route Game.

Top Video, 1 Min 40 Sec   Bottom Detail, www.yourkidneysupermarket.com

blessed-bandwidth.net
get Blessed Feel Secure

Shilpa Gupta's artistic method is much more than narrowing the distance between consumer and product, exposing the critical gaps between source and destination for cultural values, whether these are affection, sentiments, religion, love, fit bodies and beautiful skins, or just a healthy and long life. Her view articulates not only through reflective production (for example in Sentiment-Express.com the letters refer to themselves, letters write about the way letters are written) and is not limited to critical interventions (the works suggest to the user to become aware of the gaps between consumption and production). Gupta mediates the process of objectivation itself as a critical and at the same time dialectical process to the spectator. As the title of DiamondsAndYou already indicates, the work is not only about the relation of consumers to their most loved goods, but also about the dialectical other, "you". As a human being, it becomes impossible to complete such orders while becoming aware at the same time of the social perils as conditions of these commodities and cultural values. The user of the website is changed after using the site, her or his identity is altered, not only through the exposure of difference, but through a method commonly known as dialectical critique. The conditions of production are articulated not only with, but through media.

Shilpa Gupta has developed this play of dialectical articulation consequently further in her works, especially in Blessed-Bandwidth.net (2003), but also in Untitled 2004, DVD video projection, and in Untitled 2004, interactive video projection. For example in Blessed-Bandwidth.net, the art work is exposing various cultural contents not only next to each other, but also in contextural relation to each other. The IP address of the user, a form of micro-identity within new media, introduces a counter-cultural content and chances the introductory identity of the art work. Gupta in an artistic act has blessed bandwidth by literally going to various religious institutions. At the same time, she has made a global website local through a polycontextural use of IP addresses. She has not only pointed to the non-subjective nature of global media, not to speak of the question of religious mediation, she has also, through the slight introduction of change in the art works identity, articulated something we can call polycontextural content.

One of the reasons why media technology can be global is: technology completely ignores and is neutral towards culture. Claude Shannon for example, the founder of information theory, has given bandwidth a measure, called channel capacity. The ideal process of coding is always independent from content. The coding algorithm doesn't change itself depending on the local character of media. This condition of electronic media is one of main reasons why media can be global and process different cultures, as pure exchange value, independent from local context, not expressing use values. Since computation is non-subjective, electronic media can be global and be indifferent towards culture. Would the formal means of electronic communication, for example coding, change while being communicated, source and destination could never be the same. But this is what we expect from interactive art, a reciprocal and developing difference in source (artist) and destination (spectator).

LOG on
and IMMERSE
into blessed bandwidth

Now at the TATE MODERN Website
Get Blessed for Instant Peace and Happiness!

GET BLESSED FEEL SECURE

| Choose Religion ▼ | Submit |

Choose Religion
~ Indu Siddivinayak Temple
Mausoleum of Saint Haji ali
Sikh Sri Deshmesh Darbar
Christian Saint Michael's Church
Sri Sri Ravi Shankar
Buddhist Worli Temple

1024 x 768

BLESSED-BANDWITH.NET, 2003
Internet

Get blessed for instant peace and happiness.
The artist went to places of worship from different religions, carrying an Internet Network Cable with a Request for Blessings, to bring peace and happiness to those who come in contact with the bandwidth generated via the cable. This cable was then plugged into the main server where the website is hosted, at the VSNL Data Centre in Mumbai.

Net Art Commission from Tate Online
http://www.tate.org.uk/netart/blessedbandwidth/

Similar twists within identities are explored and discovered in Untitled 2004, DVD video projection. Here, Gupta shows changing fragments of western architecture built up in Mumbai, extracting the style of colonial patterns and historical remains of *dispositifs*. With time passing and architecture moving in the video projection camouflaged persons are drawn more and more into the buildings. Depending on the political attitude of the spectators, these camouflaged persons can be regarded at the same time as terrorist, conquering colonial structure and unfolding a local subjectivity, or as soldiers, protecting power in being. The process of experiencing the video installation as objectivation through the viewer is opened through camouflaged actors offering oppositional and dialectical identities.

In Untitled 2004, interactive video projection, the viewer can select out of a multiple array of identities. Seven persons, dressed up in camouflage fashion, mimic typical behaviour in contemporary capital society. The individual bodies, carrier of *dispositifs* of power, are offered as an invitation to choose the most likely personal equivalent. Once a choice has been made, the selected virtual counterpart starts to execute power structures. These movements quickly spread to neighbouring persons. Just while having made an individual choice, and while seeing the spread, reproduction of micro-power, the copying of actions and reactions, this experience of *dispositifs* in operation is given back to active viewer, who, in turn, becomes aware what everybody does and how power operates, being offered to make the next choice. The procedure to make choices, the experience of the spread of power through movements within an array and a cascade of multiple identities, the reflection back to the

action of the viewer, is dialectical and critical at the same time. A critical chiasm is mediated, since the reciprocal action of artwork and viewer is mutually depending on each other. The installation is an interactive dramaturgy of dialectical difference.

Shilpa Gupta's critical style and method is, therefore, and in respect to interactivity, a sharp contrast to current contemporary media practice. Assuming and mimicking the cultural context of the viewers, their media based habits of consumption and beliefs are dragged into the critical context of the artist. Whereas the political ideology of interactivity is expressed in the claim to give the user power over media, choice within data, this ideology assumes that the user can change media or create content within media and art. Here, the artwork itself as process of subjectivation changes the user's actions and reactions. Art and media seems to be able to make a choice between two types of interactivity. In one, the user can alter and co-inform the content, whereas in the other, the spectator is invited to critical change. Whereas the common definition of interactivity is that the viewer changes the artwork, here the artwork changes the user. Similar to polycontextural computation, the change of the identity of the system, the spectator is changed through the introduction and staging of polycontextural content. Shilpa Gupta articulates the process of subjectivation and mediates this experience through transclassical mechanisms, through polycontexturality in operation.

This dialectical critique of media, cybernetics and information, is not to be mixed up with techniques and

methods in structuralism or post-structuralism. Claude Levi-Strauss in his structural anthropology, which offers a methodological analysis of human structures in societies, has developed his method in analogy to computing machines from IBM. One might accept, therefore, a little short cut: structuralism is a closed feedback loop operating on a given set of data. Post-structuralism went far further. It is not only operating in the symbolic, it challenges structure through the real. Post-structuralism breaks the identity and regime of signifiers through a permanent and deconstructive process of pointing towards the real. In more technical terms of media theory, we would simplify: bandwidth is used properly once messages are coded as mimicry of noise, in terms of entropy. But difference and repetition, also in analogy to information and redundancy, does not, unfortunately, offer a method to articulate the process of subjectivation within new media. We might accept, therefore, another short cut: post-structuralism is a feedback loop continuously oriented towards and operating in the real. The post-human condition gives equally no mechanisms for life. As Shilpa Gupta has sketched in Xeno-Bio-Lab.com (2003) the capitalistic consequences of current science and future biotechnology will cover equally the critical conditions of social production. The art works of Shilpa Gupta suggest an alternative: to introduce more and more a dramaturgy of interactive polycontexturality.

In the early 50s of the last century the dangerous aspects of new media as life have been expressed very simply and impressively by Claude Shannon. Just after having laid the general frame for electronic communication theory

he has constructed a simple machine, called ultimate machine, or simply the on/off-machine. It consists of a simple small box, having just one switch, facing and inviting a potential user. If you throw the switch, ON, the box starts to shake a bit, the ceiling part opens, a mechanical hand comes out and reverses the switch to its original state: OFF. This digital feedback loop is the lethal closure of electronic communication, not only since World War II. This is how media are operating. If we turn our TV on, the TV actually turns us off. If we launch an electronic game on a console, the required action to reach the next level might stress and involve our brain and body, but in a way, the game turns us off as well. Hot media, are, of course, not cool. But what we are looking for in art and media are not closed systems, but open processes that allow us to participate rather than being switched into a closed electronic feedback loop.

We cannot criticise the scattered politics of identity in reference to the concept of intensive difference, multitudes, and multiplicity any more. The problem, as contemporary media and art is showing, is no longer to replace identity with difference and repetition. The challenge is to mediate between identities and differences at the same time. It is not enough to break representation and hierarchy with intensive difference. Mainly because these notions do not offer an operational difference. Multiplicity doesn't make computation subjective. The mediation between thought and being requires, as always, numbers. As long as we don't have operational and electronic languages dealing with these new numbers in software, that would be a challenging post-digital condition, the exploration of

opposite

B L E S S E D - B A N D W I D T H . N E T , 2 0 0 3

>Verification : Verify the blessing with photographs or even videos of the artist's journey to different shrines.

> Get Blessed: Step 1) Sit Straight. Don't Lean
Step 2) Bend Forward Slowly. Concentrate.
Step 3) Touch your forehead to the screen at the Spot X.
You can print a page certifying the blessing.

>Library: Upload images of their gods to the online Album; write about 'rules they love and rules they break most often' in the Rules Desk; and dress up your favourite God/ Priest in the Closet.
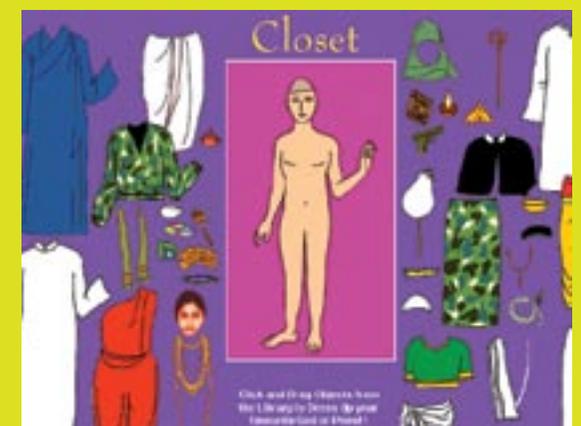
multiple and open identities might be mediated through a polycontextural assemblage of culture and content. The dialectical critique of electronic media would phrase: the discontexture between software and hardware, mind and matter, spirit and body is currently explored practically through media.

One promising way to overcome the deadly closure of the feedback of electronic communication, taking the politics of difference serious in contemporary media culture, is to introduce polycontexturality within media. Shilpa Gupta's art are expressions of polycontextural rather than intensive difference. She explores and shows through various methods how feedback can be staged in an open and critical way. The unfolding of *dispositifs* of power within the process of subjectivation does not need to be a passive alone, it can be countered through critical interaction. As mediation between hierarchy and heterarchy, perception and participation, we might try more and more such operational and dialectical techniques of polycontexturality. Thanks to Shilpa Gupta we can make new differences not only in discourse, but also through media while staging polycontextural participation. Gupta's art works are nothing less than real critical feedback loops !

*
English translation
"I wish after all those years
for a new stroke in dream"

–Barbara Morgenstern

BLESSED-BANDWIDTH.NET, 2003
> Download: Holy Watermarks - photographs for your Desktop
of water considered holy in different faiths

Above
Water from
Top River Ganges
Middle Jordan River
Bottom Mecca