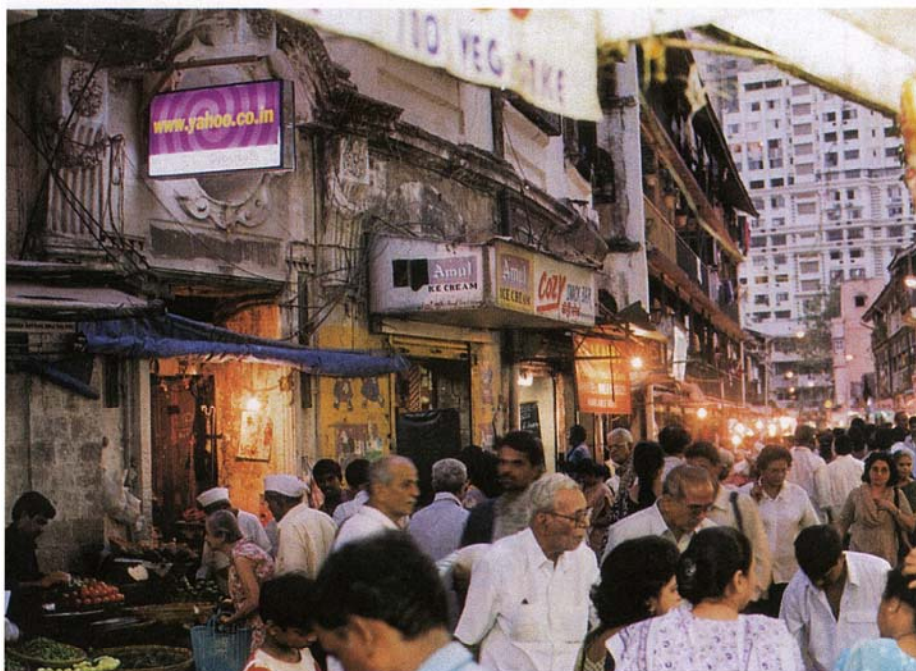


Net Culture: Between the Fast Lane and the Slow

Nancy Adajania addresses the aesthetic and political questions thrown up by the emergence, in India, of a culture built around the Internet. This culture, she argues, could radically transform our art experience in the future.



(Above and below) Old economy, new economy: Bhaji Gali, a crowded bylane off Grant Road Station in central Mumbai, where greengrocers and cybercafe entrepreneurs co-exist peaceably. Photos courtesy Prakash Rao.

Going Fast, But Where To?

Why, it could be asked, are we discussing Net culture in the context of Indian art, at a time when very few Indian artists have engaged meaningfully with the resources of cyberspace? If I felt the need to contribute a prognostication into the future of virtual art practices in India, in the form of this essay, it is because such practices will undoubtedly come to play an important role in future cultural production. Further, they will transform the way in which the Indian art world is structured, change its constituent profile, and its relations to seemingly unrelated fields such as those of quantum physics and political activism.

The Net is, almost by definition, a site of political and cultural resistance; it serves its radical potential best when allied to real-world bases of resistance. Any such prognostication as the present one would be incomplete, therefore, without an evaluation of the

subcultures from which Net-based art practices will emerge. It would also be of interest to speculate on how artists may deal with the aesthetic possibilities of virtual art while remaining conscious of the changes that the advent of the Net has triggered off in India's socio-cultural and economic hierarchies.

I must state, right at the outset, that this essay is not concerned with computer-aided art as it is understood in the Indian art world today. The burning of CD-ROMs of existing paintings, the practice of digital transfers on canvas, and the use of the printer to make high-resolution graphic prints do not qualify as Net Art. Most Indian artists who are interested in computer-based technology have yet to come to terms with the fact that *the computer is not a neutral technological site that can be used in a purely instrumental way, while ignoring its ideological and cultural underpinnings*. One does not become a cyber artist merely by substituting the brush with the mouse.

By Net Art, I mean an art that uses the protocols and the architecture of the Net as its medium. With this basic guideline in mind, I would say that artists like Baiju Parthan and Shilpa Gupta and the members of the Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) have addressed virtual reality in their own distinct ways to bend the grammar of contemporary Indian art. We shall deal with their works in greater detail later.

We must remember that Net Art is not going to be yet another fashionable medium to be trifled with. In the scenario that I will outline, conventional institutions of art such as galleries and museums may perhaps become defunct – as the cyber-artist Jeffrey Shaw notes playfully (while discussing his installation, *The Virtual Museum*), the telematic living room of the future will



be occupied by "sedentary travellers in a simulated world" with world-ranging access to art holdings at their cybernetic fingertips. Theoretically, at least, technology will ensure that the process of production, access and reception of art will be fully democratised. Art, therefore, will be vehiculated through telematics: this will transform not only its form, but also its content, in radical ways.

In the future, I suspect, art will undergo a comprehensive process of 'de-matting'. I employ this financial metaphor, drawing it from the realm of stocks and shares, to push to the extreme the idea of a de-materialised and de-localised art of the future. 'De-mat art', as I will call this telematics-based art of the future, will function in a constantly changing virtual landscape that is trans-time and trans-space. Rapid advances in the field of telematics (especially the increasing use of computer systems in the former Third World) will ensure the sustenance of such a de-materialised art, and also facilitate the entry, into this new space of art, of impulses that were not formerly regarded as 'art-worthy'.

Telematics-based art venues may well produce a new democratisation. They could nurture new online and offline communities of users, viewers and players: de-mat art will find its artists and audiences, not among the traditional community of academy-trained fine artists and art-gallery viewers, but among computer nerds, animators, architects, designers, cultural theorists and political activists.

But here comes the cautionary tale. Even as the process of art-viewing becomes de-hierarchised, art may run the risk of becoming indistinguishable from entertainment: it will share a *hyphenated relationship with fashion and commerce*, it will be topical and always of the moment. So we must reflect on whether it would not, in its very novelty, cease to have a determinate bearing on the textures and directions of our lives, if it is constantly ephemeral, spasmodic, if it scintillates briefly before our eyes and is gone? This momentariness of the new de-mat art experience will, perhaps, negate the values of more conventional artworks: those of contemplative energy,



Kids at hole in the wall: NIIT's PC-based outdoor Internet kiosk, Kalkaji, New Delhi. Photo courtesy <http://www.doorsofperception.com/doors/doors6/transcripts/mitra.html>.

poised presence, critical subversion and robust affirmation. Will *de-mat art sacrifice substance to speed*?

Discussing the harmful effects of speed and movement in a telematic environment, in *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles* (orig. 1978; New York: Semiotext(e), 1990, p. 99), the cultural theorist Paul Virilio asks, "And what if the primary goal of travel was not to 'go' somewhere, but simply to no longer be where one is? What if the aim of movement has become like that of military invasions or sports records: to go faster while going nowhere, in other words to disappear?"

This phenomenon of "going fast, but going nowhere" can be described, in the context of virtual art, as the art of the fast lane (as against the slow lane of conventional art, based on the display of physical art-works). In a speed-saturated virtual-art scenario, artistic expressions would become even more aleatory and fractal than they are today. *At the culmination of de-mat art there would be a total disintegration of the image.*

Let us, polemically, accentuate this alarmist vision of the art of the fast lane. Here, technology augments the role of human agency so that the mind-body functions through prostheses. With so much free play on offer, the possibility of *aleation*, coupled with the sheer availability of visual and textual content, makes the viewers/users forget what they were looking for in

the first place. When the viewer/user is clicking/jumping from one hypertext to another, s/he is always on the move, but *motion is not movement, just as speed is not a guarantee of arrival, or even of discovery*. Motion and speed become goals in themselves, and this is a dangerous development.

Eventually, this situation would lead to an atrophy of the senses. The producers and receivers of art will no longer function as autonomous beings within their mind-bodies; they would be handicapped without their machines. And now, with advances in biotechnology that may change our faculties through implants rather than prostheses, the enslavement to technology, and especially to telematics, would be complete, insidious, and binding. In this *dromomaniac environment* (in Virilio's phrase; the word comes from the Greek *dromos*, meaning a race, a pursuit of speed) we may become a superhuman species, but we would lose the possibilities of wonderment that go with being human.

We have to therefore understand that telematics, a product of globalisation, is no longer just an option: it is a condition. As the Raqs Media Collective points out it has been estimated that there will be 23 million online users in India by 2003, to be followed by an exponential growth in their numbers. Already, after the opening-up of the Indian economy through the



Jeebesh Bagchi with students of the Cybermohalla project who were spending five weeks at Sarai's public access space.

'liberalisation' policies determined by the International Monetary Fund, we have witnessed the installation of several thousand roadside cybercafes across the country. Dromology has changed the pace, space and architecture of the Indian street, and the emergence of a cyber-community cutting across traditional boundaries of class, caste, gender, region.

Two Indian cities, Hyderabad and Bangalore, are considered the dream-destinations of the software industry. Consider Hyderabad, for instance: it was once the feudal capital of the Nizami kingdom, and then became the capital of the province of Andhra Pradesh after independence; today, it has been transformed by software dromomania into a postmodern city of virtual finance, high technology, spectacular entertainment and accelerated consumption.

Not surprisingly, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, is a dedicated Netizen. A popular magazine ran a story recently, about how his administration is willing to respond to citizens' grievances sent by email. But what of the illiterate, the disempowered, those without access even to the usual channels of justice, leave alone a PC terminal or a lease-line? How do such people (who number in the millions) reach the Chief Minister

at his email address?

Because, in rural Andhra Pradesh, outside the capital Hyderabad, poverty and undernourishment are endemic conditions. Impoverished weavers, broken by the failure of the cotton crop and the lack of insurance, continue to commit suicide. Maoist guerrillas continue their armed struggle for the rights of the impoverished peasantry, and are engaged in a brutal war with the police, but Chief Minister Naidu would not embellish his website with such details: the website, like the entire image of techno-savvy, is driven by the redemptive vision of global capital; it is meant to attract foreign investment to the province. One need not spell out, therefore, that cyber-access has become a simulation of democracy in this case: an ersatz advertisement selling technological progress as democratic progress!

Neither cyber-access nor a nascent cyber-community translates automatically as emancipation. Commenting on the unequal geography of access in electronic space, Saskia Sassen talks of a new "geography of centrality and one of marginality". ("The Topoi of e space: Global Cities and Global Value Chains", posted on *Nettime*, 28 October 1996) Can the dromological architecture of cyberspace be made

truly democratic? Can it become a virtual venue for artistic and political activism? This is where artists can, in the future, work as ethical and political agents of change by setting up counter-republics in virtual space, dynamising the dispersed cyber-community of the present into a coherent public force.

So that speed does not result in an implosion of space, these republics should aspire to being truly *res publica*, "things of the people". Take the fast with the slow, galvanise speed towards action and not passive reception. We should not allow technology to shape us, we should shape its contours and make them more humane. If we do not want technology to take over public spaces of protest and resistance, we will have to alter the dromological architecture of the telematic space. Artists will have to explode the one-way lanes of image-consumption and articulate broader political and social needs through artistic strategies that enter the public debates laterally.

They would have to set up multiple interfaces, getting out of even the singular interface between the gallery and street which fascinates so many artists today: already, it has become played out, become an aestheticised act without political edge. In formal terms, artists can use the device of interruption, which, as Virilio put it (in conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, in *Pure War*; orig. 1983; New York: Semiotext(e), revised edition 1997, p. 40), acts as a punctuation to the existent dromomania: "Interruption is a change of speed."

When art becomes dromomaniac, as we have seen, the image which is an irreducible unit of all art-works becomes less dynamic, and gets dispersed and fragmented. Fast-lane art has yet a few things to learn from the old-fashioned slow-lane art: the image in the slow lane, by reason of its slowness, can develop in substance, assert ethical weight and determinacy. Being a physical entity, to be approached in space and time, it provides within itself a pause for reflection, revelation and contemplative attention to the art-object. What it lacks in terms of reflecting the accelerated momentum

and dizzying transformations of the telematic age, it makes up for in these ways.

The lesson that the slow lane offers the fast is this: The freedom promised by telematics will be realised only if there is actual material empowerment: telematic freedom must be positioned within a robust understanding of political economy, or else it is doomed to being a mere fantasy-play. Salvation lies neither in speed nor in inertia, then, but in their creative reworking. The art of the future will be modulated between the slow and the fast lanes, especially for the former Third World countries; for us, indeed, such a modulation will be far saner than a plunge into the no-holds-barred, no-upper-limit traffic of fast lane, enticing as it is. After all, artistic freedom without responsibility is like driving blind.

Online/Offline

The tension between the fast and the slow can also be translated in another way, as a conflict between the pleasure of online virtual experience and the demands of offline real-world engagement. There are two approaches that we may look at here. The first is the corporate approach (this is inevitable considering that digital technology is produced by global corporations) and the other is the community approach (backed by educational institutions and civil-society activist groups). While both emphasise the need to understand how the sociology of online interaction community maps onto that of offline interaction, there are important differences of motivation and methodology.

I will instantiate the first approach with Dr Sugata Mitra's *hole in the wall* computer education experiment, which was conducted in 1999 in keeping with his policy of 'minimally invasive education' for the poor. Dr Mitra, who is Head of Research & Development at the National Institute of Information Technology, a software and education corporation, New Delhi, installed a PC-based outdoor Internet kiosk on the institute's boundary wall which it shares with a slum (the NIIT office is situated in

Kalkaji, in south Delhi).

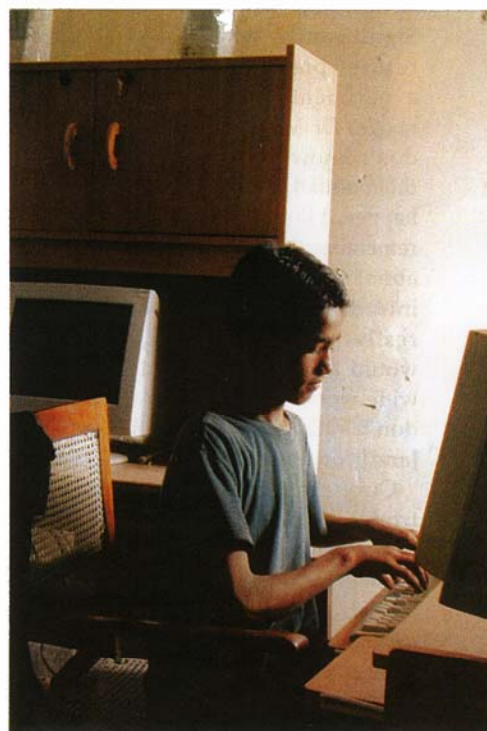
I interacted with the slum children at the Kalkaji kiosk who crowded around the computer screen to use the touch pad to move the cursors up and down and enter the programme. Not all of them were illiterate, but most of them could enter the files of their choice through character recognition and trial and error. Dr Mitra feels that there is no need for a teacher to teach basic computer literacy that is in his own words, "defined as turning a computer on and off and doing the basic functions...." (quoted in Paul Judge ed., *Businessweek Online Daily Briefing*, March 2, 2000)

He believes that, since the children can give free rein to their natural curiosity and teach each other, there is no need for "formal instruction". This may sound like a laudatory non-invasive, non-pedagogic approach. But, with its lopsided emphasis on 'access', this rhetoric fails to address the extremely contentious issue of content. Actually, the choice of content available to the slum children is astonishingly incongruous when compared to their life context. There are the mandatory slugs of 'Discover India', 'Education', 'Entertainment' and 'Literacy'.

Most kids go into Disney.com, play games as well as draw with Microsoft Paint. The rare bright kid will read the Hindi news and another one tells me that he likes reading on the Taj Mahal. In true bioscope style, I genuflect to read the content on this structure of fantasy, only to realise that it is a banal joke on the Taj Mahal at the expense of women, its constant refrain being: *Mumtaz nahi milti*.

In Dr Mitra's rhetoric of computer access and bridging the digital divide between the knows and the know-nots of the future, I detect a cynicism towards the impoverished sections of society who – even with basic computer literacy – will, for old-fashioned reasons of caste, class and gender, never be able to translate that knowledge into social change. And in any case, I found myself asking what kind of knowledge these children were going to derive from this channel-viewing, which amounts to an old-style television experience. Where is

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Shamsher one of the participants of the Cybermohalla project working at a computer. Photos courtesy Sarai.

LEAD ESSAY

the question of interactivity when the kids do not know the range and implications of life on the Net?

It is difficult to understand Dr Mitra's notion of computer literacy, which seems delinked from the issue of real-world literacy. Content delinked from context, both in the real

and the communities, real and virtual, they may want to reach out to.

Expressing a diametrically opposite vision, Shuddhabrata Sengupta of the Raqs Media Collective, which has initiated the Sarai Cybermohalla project at the LNJP colony, Turkman Gate, Delhi, says that their project "is

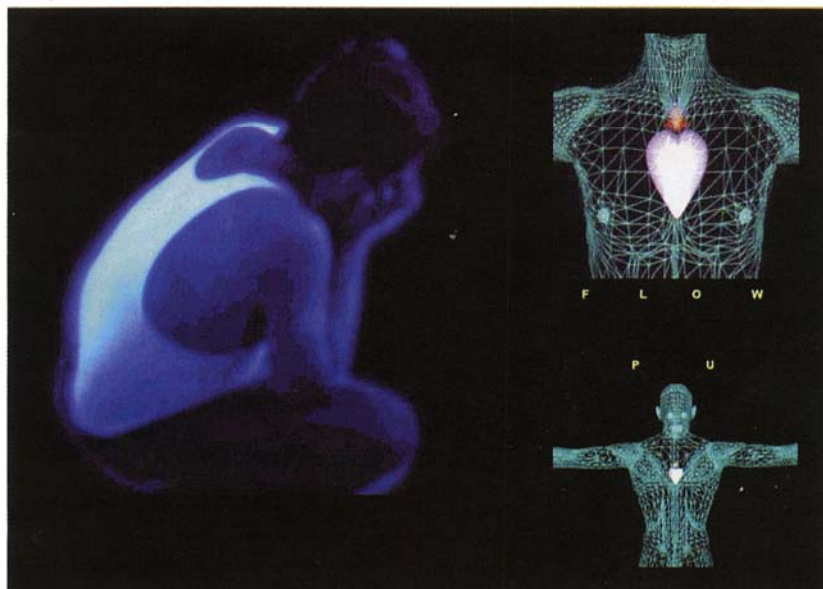
happens or some accident happens the(ir) basti remains excluded from the headlines of mainstream newspapers, remains anonymous."

For *Ibarat*, the young girls and boys began to interview the older people of the basti (they were given a camera and a tape recorder), in order to create a new map of the neighbourhood, one that accounts, through the names and little histories of features, with the lives of the inhabitants: Barber's Lane or Latrine wali Lane. Here hypertext is used not only as a language device on the Net but also as an archival trope: it links every part of the locale into a web of family recensions, translating topography into experiential history.

This project accurately reflects the aims of Sarai (a programme of CSDS, the Centre for the Study of the Developing Societies), which "is an alternative non-profit space for an imaginative reconstitution of urban public culture, new/old media practice and research, and critical cultural intervention." The Sarai team comprises the Raqs Media Collective, and Ravi Vasudevan and Ravi Sundaram from CSDS. They combine a passion for technology with a strong humanities approach. Politically conscious of the scarcity of resources and infrastructure in a developing country, they strongly believe in the free exchange of software, of code, information and cultural products. They also actively promote Hindi freeware.

The youngsters, especially the girls, who participate actively in the project, are extremely sharp and question everything they are motivated to do by the Sarai team. They work with GIMP free software. In the beginning they were against the use of collaborative bins, but have gradually come to appreciate the fact of shared learning, of continuing a dialogue with each other's texts. Content is context in this case – because the Sarai team doesn't believe in mere data collection, and accentuates the links between people and their neighbourhood.

For greater interactivity, Monica Narula says that the Sarai team is in the process of setting up a server-based radio-streaming ready broadcast of interviews on the Cybermohalla: "We can stream



(Above and facing page) Baiju Parthan. Details from *A Diary of the Inner Cyborg or ADIC – Version 0.1. Interactive cyber installation. 2002.*

and the virtual world, is amusement at best and incoherent data at worst. Significantly, when asked about his future plans in relation to this experiment, in the interview cited above, Dr Mitra said: "These children don't know what e-mail is. If I gave them e-mail, I don't know what would happen. I'll probably try it anyway. But remember the stories one used to hear about people finding lost tribes and introducing them to Coca-Cola? I'm really seriously scared about what would happen if suddenly the whole wide world had access to these kids. I don't know who would talk to them [and] for what purpose."

Quite apart from his blithe use of the tropes of colonial ethnography, Dr Mitra seems unwilling to grant the kids agency. He does not speak about *whom the kids might contact*, but rather, *about who might contact them*, as though they were objects of study or a control group for an experiment. Once again, the kids are objectified – spoken about without relation to the structure and problems of the community to which they belong,

not about passive access, it is a creative interpretative space". When I visit the young members of the Cybermohalla project at their meeting, which takes place in one of the DDA Slum Development buildings with Jeebesh Bagchi, I realise how important it is for real communities to develop in parallel with virtual communities.

This project, as its name suggests, is about exploring the labyrinths of the real world, the slums where the participants stay, with its intricate lanes and bylanes. It is also a simultaneous familiarisation with the protocols of cyberspace, so that they are empowered to choose both the form and content of the representation of what Bagchi calls their "lived everyday". On the bulletin board, I see a hard copy of *Ibarat*, an HTML bulletin brought out in Hindustani by Azra, Mehrunisa, Shamsheer, Suraj, Shahjahan, Nilofur, Yashoda and Bobby (URL:C:\cybermohalla\wall_magazine\wall_magazine1\page1.html). Reflecting on their lifeworld, they observe: "Unless some important event

from our Sarai server and then get people to give content." This will lead to effective horizontal communication and community-sharing.

The wisdom of connecting corporate imperatives to community needs has long been recognised by such cyberspace gurus as Paul Saffo, director of the Institute for the Future, a longstanding research and forecasting foundation located in Menlo Park, California. Asserting that "the scarce resource in this business is not content, but context", Saffo decries much Net content today as a "denatured, indifferent" commodity, and emphasises the importance of the "sense-making ability" that could turn vast amounts of information into "something useful that actually touches and changes our lives" (in John Brockman, *Digerati: Encounters with the Cyber Elite*; London: Orion Business, 1998, p. 260).

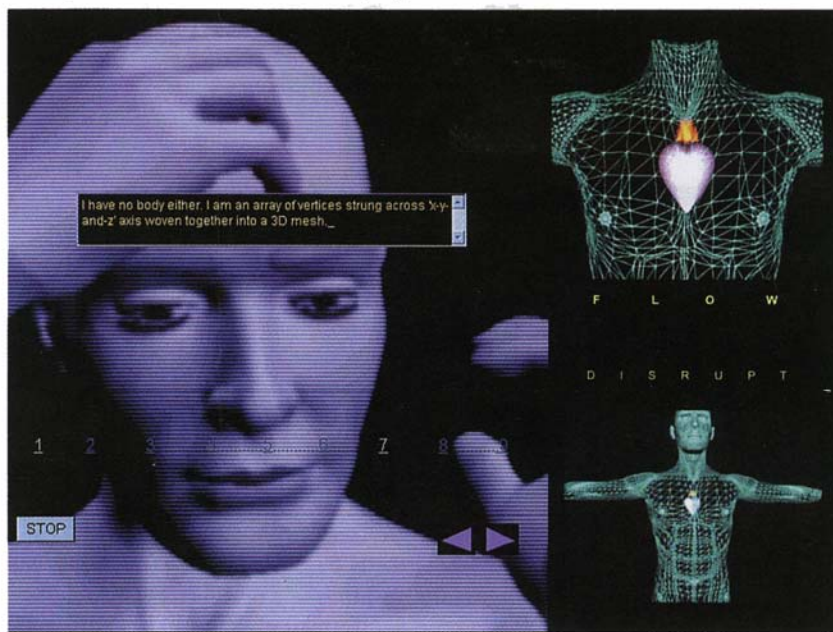
The content created at the Cybermohalla project has become an organism, in the hands of the youngsters who develop it. It has taken on a life of its own. The intriguing overlaps between the real and virtual worlds keeps them on their cyber-toes. The Sarai example has shown us that users of the Net must get acculturated into the medium, to become active agents in transforming the medium to their own ends.

Meat vs Metal

Let us now look at some Net Art works made both by academy-trained artists and media practitioners. These artists have wrestled with the grammar of this idiom to create their own distinctive syntax.

Educated as an engineer and a painter, Baiju Parthan makes sophisticated use of Net-based technologies in his art. In *A Diary of the Inner Cyborg*, Parthan experiments with the literary genre of cyberpunk while also dealing with philosophical questions of the self, the 'I' distributed in a fragmentary manner over discourses ranging from the painter's everyday urban life to the mythic inner world of the cybernaut. Parthan addresses the crisis of identity played out in the hiatus between 'meat' space (cyber slang for the human body) and

'metal' space (likewise cyber slang for the cybernetic environment). The artist has taken on different avatars in his Net-based works, making the human and machine impulses inextricable form each other. One of his prominent cyber aliases is the mythological figure of Orpheus. The dismembered singing



head of Orpheus functions as an ode to immortality in meat space; in metal space, it bears the anti-Cartesian connotation of the whole world compressed into the mind.

When we click into the diary of this avatar, we encounter the constant refrain: "What time is it?" Inside Parthan's work, time is not just the chronological linear time of meat space, but is seen as a function of consciousness. So the avatar transits between real time and virtual time. The avatar is confident of being an integral part of the virtual world, but he also has the human doubts of unresolved identity and occasionally asks the question, "Am I missing something?"

This sense of the loss of the human dimension is brought out when the avatar talks about his "dysfunctional heart". When parts of the human body become machines, he asks whether this leads to redundancy: "Is (this) redundancy immortality?" This question is best understood when we click on the flame-spurting heart made of 3D mesh: we are treated to

One of Parthan's prominent cyber aliases is the mythological figure of Orpheus. The dismembered singing head of Orpheus functions as an ode to immortality in meat space; in metal space, it bears the anti-Cartesian connotation of the whole world compressed into the mind.



(Above, below and facing page) Raqs Media Collective and Mrityunjay Chatterjee. Details from Global Village Health Manual. Net-based work, available on CD-ROM. Images courtesy Sarai.

stop-start television clippings that function like impotent sensory excitements. Labeled *FLAWS*, the metal heart, at one level, replicates the redundancy of television data, rendered superfluous by the self-repeating, never-sleeping global media. But, at another level, you realise that this robot heart belongs iconographically to the family of sacred heart images. Still committed to a transcendental quest, the artist's techno-shamanic imagination settles uneasily over the 3D mesh.

This perception is further sharpened by the rotating body below the heart, which is labeled *DISRUPT*. When we click on this body we read an 'error' message: "Uploading of proxy self not allowed." What seems like a momentary disruption is actually an ethical question that Parthan the artist ask himself, and asks the system that allows for the creation of avatars. How many proxy selves can be created without losing the 'I'? Can one really traverse the labyrinths of meat space and metal space seamlessly? Parthan leaves us with this doubt, giving a new ring to the concept of disruption. Here, disruption is not understood as an interruption of flow or as a seizure of control; it is meant as a break in a relentless logic, a space for conscious reflection.



Playing Versions

We now move to *Compositions*, one of the links of www.sarai.net, which is intended to function "at the intersection of technology and digital creativity", and invites interactive images, text, posters, sound and multimedia works by people working across disciplines. Thus blurs the line between the artist as divine creator and the lay person as passive recipient. For instance, in the multimedia work, *Global Village Health Manual*, the Raqs Media Collective and Mrityunjay Chatterjee have strategically employed 19th-century popular prints from Calcutta as an interactive interface to subvert the canonical ideas of high art and low art, classical and popular.

Just as the production and dissemination of these prints became a mass phenomenon with the evolution of printing technology, the arrival of the Net has democratised art and opened its production and dissemination to newer constituencies. And if Net Art is not thought of as serious art at the moment, neither were the popular prints regarded as serious art in their time!

Raqs and Chatterjee have chosen reproductions that advertise better health. When you click on the body of the print protagonist, the old databases of conventions and taboos invisibly leak into the neo-colonial deceptions of the complex overwhelming databases of the present. The tension between the old world of wonder cures and marvel products and the new world of genetically engineered modifications and bio-technologies provides a robust friction. The databases of the World Wide Web have been extensively rummaged to diagnose the ailments of the present and prognosticate those of the future. The hypocrisies of Monsanto as well as the commercialised fantasy play of an idoru are critiqued.

The Raqs Media Collective has also initiated the Opus Project (An Open Platform for Unlimited Signification), an online space where people can "use, edit and redistribute" the source (code), in this case, images, sounds, videos and texts. This project is based on the principle of recension: "a

narrative which can give rise to another narrative (which is neither a clone nor a copy of the 'original'). We see this as being vital to the development of a collaborative space for creation.... Curiously, this is the process by which epic narratives have multiplied. A good example is the way in which the narrative of the *Mahabharata* in South Asia has formed and reformed – as recensions – allowing for an extensible multiplicity of meanings and authorial agencies."

*This emphasis on recensions and variations, of updates and remixes is a consistent feature of Net Art. By following the principles of free software cultures, Opus questions the proprietorial intention of such arrangements as copyright and collaboration, and redefines authorial agency. Interestingly, too, Parthan's work is called *A Diary of the Inner Cyborg* or *ADIC - Version 0.1*, indicative of the fact that his Net-based works exist in many versions.*

The artist Shilpa Gupta's Net-based work, *diamondsandYou.com*, de-romanticises the notions surrounding a premium elite product like the diamond by proving its connection to the gun trade in Sierra Leone, and by linking its processing methods to child labour in India. She provides all the relevant website links to give evidence of the political and economic exploitation related to the production and sale of diamonds. The intention of the work is impeccable, but the execution is somewhat lacking in sophistication. The viewer is made an offer to choose diamonds online and then treated to all the politically correct details. A special offer of 'take home prints', comprising 'upclose inside views of the artist's body and diamonds', is also made. Here the artist neatly subverts the viewer's voyeuristic expectations by offering extreme close-ups of her skin studded with a diamond. On the whole, the work fails to touch one because the irony remains at a textual level; the webpage layout as well as the graphics and photographs are designed in a rather unchallenging manner.

There's another caveat here: Net Art is not about inventorying the available features of the Net, it is about innovating through them to affect the



real world. Content can be transformed into art through imagination; otherwise, the artist is reduced to keystroking and data-gathering. The challenge for Indian artists will be to create their own distinctive Net Art dialects, so that they can address, not just generic issues of concern to international political correctness, but the specific anxieties and provocations of the local in the age of globalisation.

(A section of this essay has appeared on www.anthology-of-art.net, a collection of essays by international art theorists and artists invited by the Jochen Gerz Foundation of the Braunschweig School of Art)



Shilpa Gupta. Detail from *diamondsandYou.com*. Interactive cyber installation. 2000.