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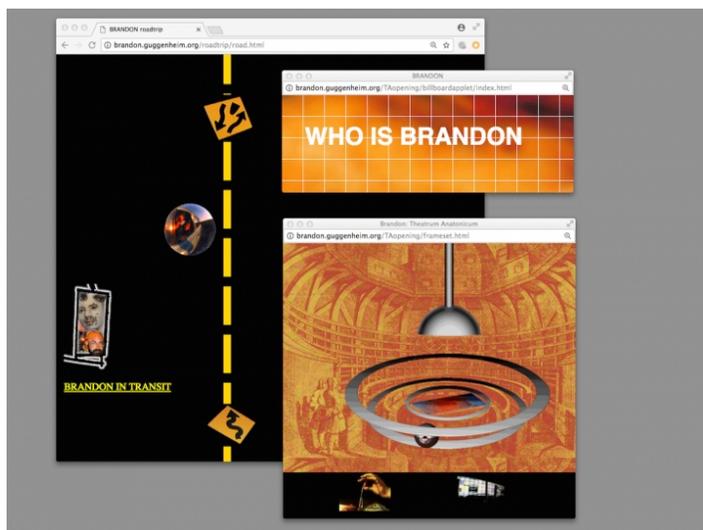
The Guggenheim Restores Its First Web Art Commission

“Brandon” was completed in 1999, and it is based on the rape and murder of 21-year-old trans man Brandon Teena in Humboldt, Nebraska.



Claire Voon

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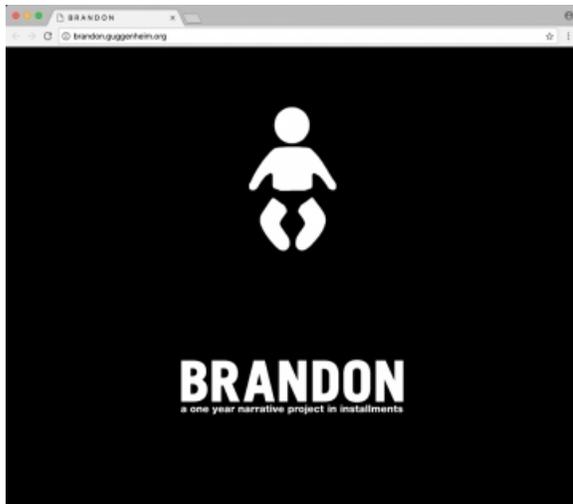
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Screenshots of “Brandon” (all images © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation)

In 1993, the 21-year-old trans man [Brandon Teena](#) was raped and murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska. His story is perhaps most widely known because of the film [Boys Don't Cry](#), but it was also explored during that same period in a much more experimental and fluid form by artist [Shu Lea Cheang](#). Between 1998 and 1999, Cheang created “Brandon,” a web-based, cyberfeminist project that represents the Guggenheim’s first web commission.

It included images and text contributions from dozens of other artists and writers on gender and racial identity issues, including traces of discussions in online chat rooms, webcasts, and a virtual court. At the time, the museum described it as a work that “deploys Brandon into cyberspace through multi-

layered narratives and images whose trajectory leads to issues of crime and punishment in the cross-section between real and virtual space.” Unfortunately, as technology updated, much of the code eventually failed to work on browsers, leaving the complex archive largely inaccessible.



Screenshot of “Brandon”

But “Brandon” is live and fully browsable once more, thanks to a recent restoration by the museum as part of its initiative to conserve computer-based art

in its permanent collection.

Working with students from [New York University's Department of Computer Science](#), Guggenheim experts have rewired what had evolved over one year into a website with five interfaces, comprising a total of 82 pages and popup windows, all originally built from about 65,000 lines of code, [according to a blog post](#) by the conservators. No code was removed during the restoration; tools just received careful updates: GIFs and JavaScript functions, for instance, now replace Java applets. From a research perspective, “Brandon” made for an ideal case study as it allowed researchers to dive into “issues in computer science, conservation ethics and practices, art history and our own institutional history with

the piece,” as Joanna Phillips, the Guggenheim’s senior conservator of time-based media told Hyperallergic.

According to [Rhizome’s Net Art Anthology](#), which now includes the artwork, Cheang was also compelled to create “Brandon” after reading a [Village Voice](#) article by Julian Dibbel about a rape that occurred in a multi-player computer game. Cheang herself referred to the project as “a one year narrative project installments,” as described on the home page — which features a figure of fluid identity, infinitely oscillating in form between the established, gendered symbols of baby, man, and woman.

Clicking through then takes you to the first interface, known as “[bigdoll](#)” — a grid that responds to your cursor to

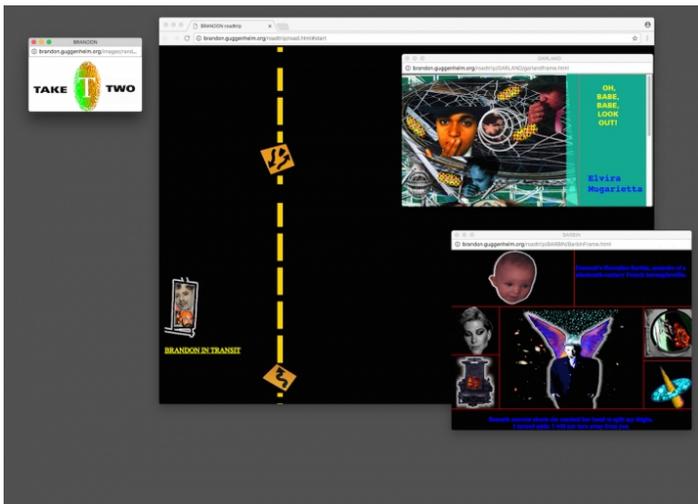
build a “recombinant social body” of images randomly drawn from 50 images. The next interface, “[roadtrip](#),” is more challenging to find (hint: it’s an image on the grid’s periphery). It consists of a scrolling highway where clicking on graphics leads to popups that deliver fragments of Brandon’s story as well as short profiles of transgender people. Users have to keep guess-clicking to explore the remaining three interfaces, “MOOplay,” “theatricum anatomicum,” and “panopticon” (and if you can’t figure it out, Net Art Anthology tells you how to access each one). Spending just a few minutes on “Brandon” makes very clear the complexity of its digital layers, which, when peeled back, reveal fragments of real-world traumas.

Brandon (1998–99) by Shu Lea Che

“Now that we can fully experience the piece again, ‘Brandon’ re-emerges with striking integrity and timeliness,” Phillips said. “‘Brandon’, while exploring the early Internet’s promise of gender and race equality in a networked world, also investigates and holds trial over a cyber rape that occurred in a virtual chatroom. By looking

at ‘Brandon,’ we learn about the beginnings of life online as we know it today.

“We also learn that after 20 years, less progress seems to have been made for the LGBTQ+ community than we think, and LGBTQ+ equality is even more at stake in our current political climate,” she added.



Screenshots of “Brandon”

Brandon was one of three online artworks that entered the Guggenheim’s permanent collection in the early years of

the web. The other two both date to 2002: [John F. Simon Jr.'s "Unfolding Object"](#) and [Mark Napier's "net.flag."](#) Both, like "Brandon," have Java applets and are not fully accessible on contemporary browsers; they are currently hosted on the Guggenheim's website (respectively, [here](#) and [here](#)). Recently, NYU Computer Science faculty and students analyzed and documented their source code, and the museum's Conserving Computer-Based Art initiative is now formulating plans to restore these works in the future as well.