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DISCUSSION

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Bindigirl-- interview with Prema Murthy

[Prema Murthy's new project "BindiGirl" opened last month on The Thing website (<http://www.thing.net/~bindigr/>). Eric Baudelaire caught up with her recently, to ask a few questions about the project, and learn more about those darn yellow earmuffs! -ag]

Eric Baudelaire: Who is BindiGirl?

Prema Murthy: Bindi is a girl born out of the "exotic" and "erotic." She is the embodiment of desire for and of the "other" - the desire of wanting to be known or to know on an intimate level and at the same time finding safety, even power in distance, in being mysterious - liberation in not being easily categorized.

Bindi is my avatar. Not only is she my alias in the virtual world but a play on the word which in India means an incarnation of a Hindu deity, the embodiment of an archetype. In this case she is the embodiment of the "goddess/whore" archetype which has historically been used to simplify the identity of women and their roles of power in society.

Bindi is neither here nor there but exists in screenal space. She is somewhere between a question and an answer.

EB: There seems to be some degree of comfort, perhaps even liberation, in Bindi's existence in screenal space, yet her bio (<http://www.thing.net/~bindigr/bio/biotext.html>) suggests that technology has failed her.

PM: Technology like religion was invented to help us cope with or liberate us from our daily existence in a physical world - to make it better somehow and bring us to higher levels of functioning. But we as humans have "bugs" in our system that keep us from moving on to the next level. Therefore our code (in both culture and computers) is erred. It is not technology itself, or religion for that matter, that has failed Bindi, but those people who use them as a means to keep in place existing structures that reject diversity and a sharing of power.

In the BindiGirl site, I draw parallels between technology and Indian religion. Bindi is meant to poke fun at how we have used these tools so far to achieve a so-called "higher existence" and "greater cultural understanding."

EB: By selling souvenirs on the site and setting-up pay-per-view performances, is Bindi trying to extract some payback from her digital predicament, or do these transactions simply confirm her subjugation?

PM: BindiGirl is the product of a colonialist mentality. She is very aware that she is being watched. She asks for something in return for being looked at to mimic the symbiotic relationship that exists in the "real" world between the colonized and the colonizer. Not only does a desire to conquer the Other exist in colonialism, but a longing by the Other for its conqueror and his (capitalist) ideals. This pattern of desire and longing must be re-evaluated before we can move on into a post-colonial territory.

EB: So.... what's with the yellow earmuffs (<http://www.thing.net/~bindigr/souvenirs/souvenirs.html>)?

PM: It can get pretty chilly with just a few dots to wear....!!!

EB: I don't blame her... Speaking of fashion, Wellhung (<http://www.thing.net/~bindigr/chat.html>), Bindi's chatroom counterpart, weighs in at 250 pounds and sports eyeglasses and blue sweat pants from Wal-Mart. How have the aesthetics and class of the colonialist archetype evolved in the digital age?

PM: For the most part it is still very white, very male and very Western. But there are signs of change occurring, like with the Zapatista movement for example.

Access seems to be a major deciding factor on who can actually launch into cyberspace and make some kind of impact there. Access not only to equipment but also to the knowledge of how to use the equipment - either through other people or learning on your own - which in turn ends up being about time and money.

It is very interesting to see how the Net is developing as corporations are allotting huge portions of their budget to equipment and bandwidth, but don't have any idea about how it all works or a clue about aesthetics. Meanwhile, artists and hackers, who have the knowledge but not the capital, are teaming up with them. Another type of symbiotic relationship is forming but just who is the colonizer and the colonized - the artist or the corporation - is hard to tell.

How I became interested in porn specifically on the Net was out of research I was doing on streaming technology for my performances. I searched for interesting art sites that were up-to-speed on the technology but found that it was the porn industry that was way ahead of everybody. They were using the newest software that was easy for anyone to use and making money at it as well.

EB: Porn made the VCR, and it will make the Internet... Why does the porn industry play such an important role in bringing technologies, concepts and business models into the mainstream?

PM: Desire is a subject that many of us, despite race, class and gender, can relate to in some way. It determines much of how we relate to other people and things, how we identify and are identified. It touches a very base aspect of who we are as human beings. I think we cannot escape desire as a link between our minds and bodies. It is what makes us human. Porn is just one manifestation of desire.

It makes sense to me that this very basic instinct is a driving force behind much of what we do, including the development of technology.

EB: Is human desire modified when experienced through the interface of technology?

PM: Masturbating to your favorite porn can get you off - quick and easy, with no emotional strings attached, just as shopping through a catalogue is quick and easy without the hassle of dealing with the people in the stores. You know what you want, you get it, your done.

There is something very appealing about speed and convenience that technology offers. But when it comes to the acting out of desire nothing really can replace face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh encounters, or the feeling of trying on a hot pair of heels!

Not that technology is supposed be the same as "live" encounters and that real connections cannot be made using it, I just think that up until now it is still not as satisfying.

I've heard of VR experiences where people can experience desire through another's eyes, body, etc... but I personally can't do VR because it makes me nauseous. I get motion sickness really easily....!

EB: Is all of your art digital?

PM: There is always an element of the digital in my work. I output digital prints, usually inkjet or electrostatic, my performances are broadcast on the Net, I process sounds either found or of my voice through the computer.... I am currently working on an installation using a MIDI-triggering device to effect the audio and video environment.

It seems very natural to have chosen to use technology as my main means of expression. Conceptually, my work in general is about how perceptions of ourselves are changing through technology. But besides that, when it come down to it, I am more comfortable with a mouse in my hand than I am with a paintbrush.

EB: Another tool you seem pretty comfortable with is your body. In Fakeshop (<http://www.fakeshop.com/>) there is also a lot of performance, and a fair amount of nudity. What are the conceptual continuities/discontinuities pertaining to physicality and spectatorship?

PM: In Fakeshop performances we tend to deal with issues of the body and how it's translated through technology. We talk about the body as a generic body - an organ, a machine.

In Multiple Dwelling, an installation and performance piece presented by Fakeshop last year, the performers wore coverings below the waist but chests were bare. We wanted to present the body as a machine, a machine that rebels against an overload of exterior technological control. We made a conscious decision to use both male and female performers to evoke a generic body because there would be nudity involved. All we heard from many of the audience members was "look at all those breasts!" They could not get past the fact that there was a half-naked body standing in front of them. The male performers seemed invisible.

Women's bodies are read differently than men's. What makes this so raises many of the same issues that I explore in my own personal work - specifically, the female body as reproductive machine = a sexualized body. Although we (women) are no longer valued socio-economically solely as baby-makers and caretakers we are still read culturally in the same way.

I think it is really interesting how many Hollywood actresses are following Pamela Anderson in having the silicone removed from their breasts. It is like they are saying "we know that there is power in sexuality but can't we move beyond it already!"

EB: How much longer will the Bindigirl site be up, and for how long will we be able to catch your performances?

PM: BindiGirl will be featured in the [projects] section of Thing.net (<http://www.thing.net/>) till the end of June. After that it will be archived on the server. The performances will continue till the end of June as well and then be archived on the site as a pay-per-view or as a members-only section.

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