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Live From Bangalore

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SOCIAL NETWORKS 1

Live From Bangalore

Beryl Graham on Jan 1 2000

issue 15

The article reveals some aspects of globalization and theories of postindustrial society influencing/creating new media. The author touches on many of the similarities and differences between India, the U.S. and Great Britain.

It's an interesting time to be a Brit visiting India and writing for a US magazine. In many parts of the world, the US "elections" have been creating a gleeful schadenfreude, whilst meantime in the UK the rail system is grinding to a halt due to some rain, and a hysterically risk-averse press. I, on the other hand, am sitting on a train, in a comfortable second-class seat reserved by computer from several thousand miles away, eating great food, and watching oxen plough the soil. The journey of 2,472 km from Delhi to Bangalore started on time, and arrived 20 minutes early. These comparisons may explain the shamefaced huffiness with which Britons and Germans recently greeted the news that their countries needed to shape up in order to import the much-needed skills of Indian computer programmers (perhaps the exporting of our drugged-out hippies was thought to be fair exchange enough).

Any comparisons between UK/USA/Indian uses of new media are therefore likely to be less contrasting than expected. What the three countries share is a basic structure of sharp socio-economic divides, so that leading Indian artists are likely to have access to much the same ideas and facilities as leading Western ones (the former, however, will know much more about the latter than vice versa). The well-established artist **Vivan Sundaram**, for example, has been making video installation and site specific work for many years, and is now also working with CD-ROMs. Although installation work is rather controversial in India (see **Anjolie Ela Menon's article**), Sundaram's approach, which often combines solid engineering with the hand-crafted and the electronic, seems to echo the startling visual hybridity of Indian city life. His Journey Towards Freedom installation in Calcutta, for example, featured metal railway tracks, handpainted lettering, and video references to classic Indian films, using the huge venue both as "... studio and exhibition space." The ability of mixed media to present many views and many parts was also exploited in the exhibition Figures, Facts, Feelings by Parthiv Shah, showing at the British Council gallery in Delhi. Shah used digital prints to combine portraits, graphics, and texts from questionnaires given to the photographic subjects about their experiences of diaspora. He felt that this combination presented a more "approachable" or street-poster-like face than conventional portraits in frames.

Leading artists in Delhi seem rather notable for also exhibiting a social conscience. Both Sundaram and Shah are active in donating their time and support to Sahmat, an arts organization dedicated to combating religious and social conflict, whose work has included street theatre and cassettes of songs (rather more accessible to the masses than any newer technology). Shah has participated in photography projects in slum areas, where children were given disposable cameras in order to document their lives. Obviously, the average pavement-dweller in Mumbai will tend to have just as little access to anything technological as your average street-person in Detroit. There is, however, an interesting exception to this rule in Delhi, where **Dr. Sugata Mitra**, who works for a commercial Internet-qualifications company, has been experimenting with installing "hole in the wall" computers in slum districts, where children with no training

or literacy have been teaching themselves how to use the Internet very quickly (the hourglass icon they dubbed a "drum" of the waisted kind which summons people to an entertainment).

This crossover between commercial, social, and educational ventures seems to typify the highly fluid and active nature of the scene, seasoned by an enthusiasm for high and low culture, and internationally well-informed by the press, media and by personal diasporas. Shankar Barua's Indian Directory of Electronic Art CD-ROM magazine is produced on a shoestring in Delhi and distributed widely to those active in media art. The organization **Sarai** also typifies this dynamism, and is currently very busy building one of the first media workshops for artists in Delhi. With government and other funding, Sarai combines academic research about Indian new media with production expertise from the Raqs Media Collective, which has an established history of documentary film, photo and video. As well as working with programmers to develop Hindi language freeware for the Internet, they have already produced a CD-ROM which "appropriates" images from old printed handouts concerning health and the body, and images from their modern equivalent - the Internet. This high Indian comfort level with the concept of hybridity is perhaps one of the reasons why new media seem very at home in India. According to Shuddhabrata Sengupta of Raqs, "... all our gods are cyborgs." He also points out that there was cinema in India a matter of months after the Lumière brothers' first ever showing. **Ravi Sundaram**, another Sarai participant, stresses that the ubiquitous, tiny, manned telephone booths have been making access to telecommunications possible to anyone (literate or otherwise) for many years, and now also sometimes offer fax, email and Internet (always with a helpful human interface). Monica Narula of Raqs is busy working with organizations in the Netherlands, and is planning workshops with international activists/artists ranging from radio streamers to hackers.

Most new forms of entertainment and communication technology have been quickly appropriated, adapted, and re-invented on the subcontinent. The particularly Indian stamp often seems to be one of adding a human interface: Indian movies often have complex plots centered on relationships between people. There are people to help you use telephones and calculate the cost to the second. There's a booming trade in Internet personal ads. From my limited experience, Indian art audiences love to talk, and are highly skilled and critical in their debates. There seems little danger that Indians will fall prey to sitting alone in their rooms with a computer, despite raging traffic and trying environments outside.

It's difficult to think of any aspect of life that is not publicly visible in India. Death, chess, bodily functions, devotions, manual labor, debate and television all take place on the street, but this seems to encourage rather than dampen a wide cultural curiosity that is often absent from Anglo cultures. Dr. Pradeep Yammiyavar of the Center for Product Design and CEDT of the **Indian Institute of Science** in Bangalore, was more than willing to encourage his students to attend a debate on new media art, although in the midst of exams. He was rather rueful, however, about the unwillingness of software companies in Bangalore to develop an interest in and support for contemporary new media art, a situation which sounds more than a little like Seattle. Technological universities such as IIS, and **IIT** in Mumbai (Bombay) are doing very well indeed, thank you, and are not afraid to include visual and "community art" skills within their remit, as in the excellent **Internet projects** instigated by Ravi Poovaiah of IIT amongst others. Art colleges have had much less access so far to the necessary equipment, although the number of multimedia courses is growing, and the **Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda** appears to have a recent special interest in new media art and theory, including museology at a postgraduate level.

Crossovers between art, education and science seem to be common, and having a "portfolio" of jobs will be familiar to many artists in the West. Of a group of five friends who went to art college in Bangalore some time ago, Ravishankar Rao is a multimedia computer programmer, N. S. Harsha is an artist who draws on walls (recently in an **Iniva** show in London), Mamata is a graphic designer for print, R. Kalkur is a painter who did postgraduate at the RCA in London, and M. C. Ramesh is a sculptor and teaches art at a high school. Several of them also make web sites for organizations. At a basic level of "where, what and who," art galleries and organizations are well represented on the Internet, and there are portfolio sites such as **Saffron** and **Vis-a-Vis**, that promote and sell artists' work in various media, although as in the West, the commercial sector tends to have different values than those held by college-educated artists.

If you're talking about networking, then it looks like new media might always remain just one of the many strands in the Indian web. As an audience member at my talk at the Sakshi Gallery in Bangalore pointed out, "multimedia" actually only addresses two human senses, which means that it is a rather pale and feeble tool for dealing with Indian reality. Being in India has made me question the whole issue of visual appearance versus function. India is an eye-bogglingly visual culture, and the

technology often looks as if it shouldn't work. However, appearances can be deceptive: the bamboo stepladders bend and wobble, but don't break; small women carrying bricks on their heads build software office towerblocks; the PCs are grimy with cigarette smoke and pollution, but work; the waiting list for telephone lines is long, but there are ways around, legal or otherwise; the traffic looks utterly impossible, but keeps moving. Perhaps the skills developed in finding creative solutions to large problems are another reason why India has bonded so well with new media. The difference between appearance and workability might be usefully borne in mind by those countries whose slick surface might lead you to believe that they never had problems getting their trains to run or their presidents elected.



Screen shot detail from Work in the Age of Virtual Reproduction, a CD-ROM by Raqs Media Collective and Mrityunjoy Chatterjee, made at the Sarai Media Lab.

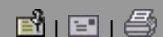


Monica Nirula of the Raqs Media Collective in the under-construction Sarai public media lab.

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Beryl Graham is a curator and educator with a special interest in new media. She is currently Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Sunderland, and is co-editor of CRUMB new media curating resource. She started this article on a train between the first two cities on a research trip to Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai, in December 2000. It was emailed from the Cyberia web cafe, Bangalore. Her **further material from India** will also be put on the web.

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