
Janice Cheddie & Roshini Kempadoo (. u k)

BEYOND THE DIGITAL DIASPORA

Introductions: Roshini Kempadoo is an image maker and part time lecturer in Photography at Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland. Roshini Kempadoo has moved from working primarily with still photography and now works with digital technology on photo installations and web based projects.

Keith Piper is a multi media artist who started his visual arts practice as a painter. Keith Piper has subsequently moved into traditional mixed media onto video art and now works with CD-ROM interactive and web based projects.

Derek Richards is a musician/performer ,sound designer and theorist with experience in theatre, popular music and film currently working as a multi media artist and producer on a range of projects.

I am Janice Cheddie chair.

Together we make-up an organisation entitled 'Displaced Data'. 'Displaced Data' is an evolving association of artists and writers of colour working with digital technology. The association aims to encourage and foster debate concerning issues of cultural diversity, cultural democracy and digital technology and to encourage to the use and development of digital technology by artists of colour.

The panel is an attempt to examine and reclaim the concept of a "digital diaspora", which is not only a name of an organisation, of which we were all former members of. But rather the concept of a "digital diaspora" is a concept which recognises the concept of 'diaspora' as signifying historical relationships of slavery, indenture, colonialism, migration, exile and econo-

mic immigration. A concept which underlies notions of physical and cultural displacement.

Within the concept of digital technology this concept emerges as a way of examining and articulating these experiences. But more importantly how we conceptualise notions of place, position and subjectivity as a series of processes, positionings and allegiances.

A concept which draws upon Black Art practice in Britain (Black Art as defined as art by artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent) which stressed ways of examining notions of identity as being the product of non-linear, inter-textual and multiple sources

Within the concept of a digital diaspora artists of colour in Britain are using digital technology as a way of exploring the on-going concerns of this cultural practice. Rather than coming to digital technology for what it can do, these artists have sought to use digital technology as a creative medium.

Within this framework the idea of a digital diaspora is one which refuses the idea of the Internet or digital technology as returning or re-unifying peoples who live or experience diaspora. Rather, the digital diaspora can be seen as one which takes as its starting point the making and re-making of critical ways of thinking about one's place in the world as a series of multiple and complex starting points.

A starting point for this discussion is Paul Miller's (aka DJ Spooky) statement "I am you, you are me with language we are three"

END.

Roshini Kempadoo

Image Producer and part-time lecturer in Photography and Digital Imaging at Napier University, Scotland.

'BEYOND THE DIGITAL DIASPORA' 'ANXIOUS REPETITION'

Work to illustrate the talk given can be seen at: <http://omnibus-eye.rtvf.nwu.edu/homestead/>

Summary:

This contribution touches on the issue of stereotyping and replication of 'real' situations and structures to that of media space/cyberspace and network communications. It is to note and examine the replication of economic/political/social structures in digital development and the use of stereotypical icons we see increasingly being used.

Like other contemporary practitioners - I come from a particular specific art form practice - in this instance - Photography. For the last four years I have intermittently explored and developed different ways of working using digital technology, and computer networks to produce, exhibit and more recently distribute my work. My work until now has been concerned with digital outputs, getting the work off the monitor to stand as photographic images. Like many photographers, this has been a vital step to make - since photography (like graphic design with the advent of desktop publishing systems) is undergoing a fundamental change through the development

of the digital image and electronic equipment. Like many practitioners of colour, the shift to using this method and process was logical to the development of my practice and approach. Fundamentally, my work is and has always been about the individual and collective status of people of colour - about the reworking of notions of identity, race and the mapping of histories culturally, physical and spiritually. By its nature the work is about the black Diaspora. It is a visual experience reflecting the sense of migration, movement, connectivity and displacement in its appearance, format and content.

The work entitled 'Sweetness and Light', is a piece produced for the project 'La Finca/the Homestead' curated by Paul Hertz for the Internet in April 1996. The work has been produced solely for the internet and does not exist in any other format or space. In retrospect, the work has a level of technical restriction that I would expect having produced such a piece for the first time - and yet I feel it contributes adequately and innovatively in content to what is out there. The piece is an analogy of the structures of colonialism and the development of 'media/cyberspace'. It looks at the parallel aspects in structure, act and motive; the replication of hierarchies and power bases, physical and psychological dominance and a clear strategy of economic and cultural gain. It starts with a quote by Aime Cesaire from the book 'Discourse on Colonialism' 1955.

'the essential thing here . here is to answer clearly the innocent first question: what fundamentally is colonisation ? ... agree on what it is not: neither evangelisation, not a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease and tyranny... nor an attempt to extend the rule of law . the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force..'

Out of the myriad of issues for discussion some of which have been discussed at this conference, I would like to touch on the issue of stereotyping and replication of 'real' situations and structures to that of media space/ cyberspace and network communications. I mean the replication of economic/political/social structures in digital development and the use of stereotypical icons we see. I don't want to question why this is happening, why there is a mimicking reciprocal process at play, between existing structures and ideologies - it is often obvious, but to note and examine it.

The financial/social and political structures of communication networks and digital developments are the same continued unequal system. The metropolitan 'developed' countries primarily of the West, having the money, power and therefore access and control of its development - perhaps with the exception of Japanese and other Asian technological development as Toshiya Ueno demonstrated in his presentation yesterday. The added dimension to this media/cyberspace development is that it is constructed as a 'new territory' a new uncharted space seeming to trigger all the predictable colonialist forms of behaviour and attitudes - 'appetite and force'. Lets be clear about the issues of access. There is absolutely no interest in selling electronic commodities at the price the worlds' poor can afford, nor is there likely to be. In fact transforming information into a saleable good, available only to those who are able to afford it, changes the goal of information access from an egalitarian to a privileged status. There perhaps goes ability to adopt the concept where the 'community is more fundamental than individuality' Sean Cubitt referred to.

'Sweetness and Light' is quite an overt visual/written state-

ment making clear some of the parallel issues between colonial expansion and development of media/ cyberspace (The title has historical references- sugar plantations associated with the Caribbean and notions of enlightenment. It also comes from the term 'all sweetness and light' a Caribbean term referring to someone being angelic, as good as ever but with an ulterior motive.) The visual material is montages of photographs of British landscape - vistas and detail, anthropological imagery and references to the 'grey box' - computer hardware. I site the material within quotes from historical publications written about plantation systems. It can be argued that it is politically essential to look at and analyse media networks/cyberspace in this way - looking at the structures, process and institutions. While this is necessary however, it can never fully explain or makes clear how power relations are embedded and sustained it doesn't fully explain the consistent stereotypical forms of representations emerging in the vast amount of information flow, or the nature of the work we see. In other words the ideological framework being instigated

I can't go into any great depth to show the complexities involved and the way in which people of colour are constructed within a social and psychological framework. A framework, a matrix of ideas in which the white beougois male is at the centre, the norm, unexplained whilst the identities of those seen as the Other constantly interrogated, investigated and monitored. Historically this came into focus during the time of rapid colonialist expansion and is part and parcel of a colonial discourse that frames all our histories.

Both Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha see the construction of stereotypes in any form of representation as crucial to the imperialist project. Bhabha asserts that stereotyping as part of the colonial discourse is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is already 'in place', already known and something that must anxiously be repeated." Further to this, Lola Young suggests that this vacillation is necessary and occurs because the discourse is attempting to fix and stabilise that which is not static. This attempt to fix that which is not static is precisely what practitioners of colour have been marshalling against. The insistence on producing work that kicks out, rejects, frees up historically fixed representations and notions. To remove and liberate the categories we are described and prescribed into - representations of ourselves or communities of colour that weren't created by us and constructed out of the fears and anxieties of the dominant white male group.

This of course is not an easy process, since we all construct and create stereotypes as deep psychological functions to our direct experiences and our making sense of the world. Not least for photography as an practice has been instrumental in at least two ways: in the construction and sustaining of stereotypes particularly during the expansionist period of the West, and being so closely associated with notions of 'truth' and 'reality'.

My own practice has always been to work precisely with those historical images produced - to re-present them using my own photography, to suggest a process of constant re-positioning, changing, non-permanence. Digitally created work, the seamless nature of digital montage, the over layering processes possible, the 'sampling' approach that can be taken and increasingly the multiplicity of digital production is particularly valuable and absolutely vital to this way of working. What better way to exaggerate and free up that notion of categorisation and fixidity by producing something within a form that is in itself non-linear, non- permanent the Internet? Here we have a development that encompasses the ability to converse, to interact, to mediate - and not be historically bound up or subjected to a monologue, fixed and permanent ideas or expe-

rience. Or is it? Roy Ascott said of Art and the Internet, 'Art is no longer seen as a linear affair dealing in harmony completion, resolution, closure - a composed and ordered finality. Instead it is open-ended, even fugitive, fleeting, tentative, virtual Forming rather than formed, it celebrates process, embodies system, embraces chaos.' Roy Ascott: Connectivity Art and Interactive Communications. Leonardo 1991. A mechanism to produce distribute and exhibit work developing in a very different way - notions familiar to people of the Black diaspora. And similar to diasporic notions, it is a space that is full of contradictions. A space full of anxieties and tensions which are not unfamiliar in experience. Yet like any new emerging issue, it has not developed in isolation or in a vacuum. It is important to debate and be aware of the context digital development arises from.

It is fair to say that the conceptualisation (although still in the making) of cyberspace has its origins in 'fiction', primarily science fiction - constantly looking forward with little references to the past Those who have read sci-fi and other related media formats (we have seen in the examples of Japanese Animation given) will know that the image given to that fictional space of the future is not particularly positive In fact it is generally a dystopian view of the future although now counteracted largely by the positive commercial viewpoint With this rather 'flimsy and light-weight' reference point in conceptualising media space comes a kind of literal translation in the form of icons, symbols etc. on the screen or monitor. A translation of the mass of data doing things behind the scenes. Sci-fi characters, games, stories, comic strip figures, popular Hollywood heroes and heroines have created iconography that have an investment in a literal almost simple translation with the ability for instant recognition. The iconography we see on the computer has inherited this aspect - generally things look as they are: the good guy or heroine squeaky clean, the bad person looks bad, large databases look large, corporations look powerful. The exception of this of course is when the process and concept of deception as a deliberate ploy is used. The graphics interface enables the translation of symbols to quick immediate recognition (creation of stereotypes and easily readable icons) to ease the way in which you make sense and navigate your way around the information.

Julian Stallabrass suggests 'the transparency of meaning in cyberspace, the absolute match between concept and appearance is a utopian feature which stands in marked contrast to the real world of meaningless detail and redundant matter'. The contradictions arise and get greater - especially for practitioners who may be addressing issues that often need to go beyond the 'playful' literal associations digital projects are increasingly being aligned to. How does a practitioner successfully produce work that moves beyond the powerful links between concept and appearance, of stereotypical icons and sc-fi dystopia? These are some of the issue I am attempting to address and explore by producing work such as 'Sweetness and Light'. Work that I feel vacillates between the 'real world of meaningless detail' and 'the transparency of meaning in cyberspace'..

c. Roshini Kempadoo - September 1996

*Diaspora - Dispersion, used collectively for the dispersed Jews after the Babylonian captivity, and also in the apostolic age for the Jews living outside of Palestine, now, for the Jews of Israel: a similar dispersion or migration of other peoples or communities.