SHAPING TECHNOLOGIES

The Sarai Programme
CSDS, Delhi
The Waag Society/for Old and New Media
Amsterdam
February 2003
SARAI READER 03 : SHAPING TECHNOLOGIES
Produced and Designed at the Sarai Media Lab, Delhi

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Cover Photo: Dylan Volkhardt
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Published by
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Delhi/Amsterdam 2003

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ISBN 81-901429-3-3

Published by the Director, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
and printed at Thomson Press, Faridabad.

Price : Rs. 295, US$ 15, Euro 15 (Paperback)
Remembering, with affection and gratitude,

STEEF HEUS (1953 - 2002)
SIDDHARTHA GHOSH (1948 - 2002)

They would have been happy to hold this book in their hands.
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Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies sets out to ratchet our engagement with the contemporary moment a notch higher, in directions that are sober, exhilarating and discomfiting, all at once.

Technology, which figures as an important strand in both previous Readers – Sarai Reader 01: The Public Domain and Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life – has here taken centre-stage as a multi-faceted constellation of ideas, images, reflections, debates, histories and provocations. The first Reader held an encounter with the discourse around free software with which we viewed the possibility of the formation of a new public domain, and the second raised issues such as biotechnology, surveillance, and the politics of information technology. This third volume in the series presents a drawing together of many threads that echo and carry forward earlier themes and discussions to offer an array of considerations that locate themselves squarely within the present, while facing the future, and with an eye towards history. This collection seeks to bring to the fore a series of situations and predicaments that mark the encounter between people and machines, between nature and culture, and between knowledge and power.

These encounters, to our thinking, embody the taking on of a particular stance towards the contemporary moment, which, notwithstanding contradictions and beset by metastasizing, proliferating, accelerating energies that pull in different directions, even while marked in equal measure by confidence and scepticism, nevertheless represents a qualified assertion of commitment to living and working in the world today, as active, transforming agents, creating new truths and meanings through praxis.

This results in a wealth of questions and issues, that span a wide range – from the
cognitive and ethical dilemmas that beset the engineer, to the legal and cultural implications of copying in a digital realm; from software as art to the history of science fiction; from wireless manifestoes to the domestication of photography; from kitchen utensils to airplanes; from mobile phones to kerosene lamps; from body nets to biotech; from reproductive technologies to technologies of reproduction; from computers to radios; from coal mines to call centres. *Shaping Technologies* brings together a host of original writing and images on these and other themes by a collection of writers, theorists, critics, photographers, philosophers, engineers, activists, artists, media practitioners and programmers from all over the world. It also excavates and connects little known histories with our present reality, finding, for instance, in Rabindranath Tagore's account of being airborne in 1934, an oblique way of reflecting on the consequences of aerial bombardment, the dehumanising mindset that implodes when the pious do battle, and the prospects of a war that threatens to break over Iraq, even as this book goes to press.

Today, technology is second nature to us. If the landscape of earlier times could be ideally represented by images of naturally occurring objects, then the landscape of the contemporary is one that can only be imagined as being peopled by machines. The 'nature' of our times is technological. We are embodied, articulated, located and governed by the machines we make to extend our lives, bodies and faculties. We shape the technologies that surround us and the technologies that surround us shape the contours of our lives. This is what we mean by the term ‘shaping technologies’, which suggests both a subjective, social appropriation of technological creativity, as well as the impact of technologies on society and life in general.

One may even say that technological ubiquity has gone so far as to make it nearly impossible for us to reflect upon technologies as phenomena separate from the general conditions of global urban life. We are what we work, play and think with, and today, we work, play and think with our machines. We are users, inventors, practitioners, artists, hackers and artisans who work with technologies. We are technology's consumers and users; we are hobbyists, enthusiasts and addicts just as we are critics, prophets, and analysts. We are masters, slaves, victims and rebels of technology. No one remains untouched by the machine.

And yet, we do not have an adequate language with which to understand and articulate the presence of technology in culture, society and politics. We are accustomed to construct utopian and dystopic technological imaginaries, even as we neglect the task of a sober and considered reflection of the ethical and cognitive dilemmas that the presence of technologies in everyday life confronts us with. And even as technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous, even as it touches wider populations, even as an immersion in technoculture becomes the condition of the contemporary moment, it becomes simultaneously the discursive monopoly of experts and specialists or of geeks and hobbyists, far removed from the concerns that animate scholars, public intellectuals, and the common curious person. Technology is the underpinning, yet the shadow of the public domain. Technology is ubiquitous, yet discursively obscure.

It is not as if a discourse of technology does not exist. Its arguments and narratives are well known, and in some cases over-rehearsed. It can be recognised by the rhetorical cycle that moves from myth and invention to hype and glorification, flipping occa-
sionally in the direction of moral outrage, and silenced in the end by expert witness and ethics committees.

Sarai Reader 03 seeks to extend the terms of discussion by asking what other imaginary space there may be, besides the imperative to consume, the irrepressible desire to shop for the next gadget that comes our way, and the whine of the perennial victim of the machine, with which we can envision technology's presence in our lives.

The titanic proportions of 'technology' provoke the question of subjectivity. Are the machines too large, too fast, too invasive, too small for us to get a cognitive, and existential grip on them? But an unvarying narrative of scale, of 'how much' technology is or can be, how much 'out of control'/‘in control', how mega, how nano, how liberating and how oppressive, makes it impossible for us to escape the trap of reiterated banalities. We need another language, another way of thinking, doing, criticising and celebrating technologies, technologists and technicians.

Is it possible for those of us who refuse to take on the mantle of techno-expertise to shape the field, to ask the questions that need to be asked about where we are taking the machines, and where the machines are taking us? Or are we condemned to be Homo Consumens forever? Is the supra-technical position only there for the chief scientists that oversee the field, steering their multi-million dollar research programmes? How can technology be shaped by those of us who are outside the laboratories?

Michel Foucault’s use of the term “technologies of the Self” assisted a generation in the critical understanding that technology was about a lot more than dams and railways. Yet, a few decades later, the proliferation of his ideas is confronting us with another dilemma. What if everything is technology and there is nothing left untouched? Can we then begin asking questions about the possible technologies of resistance, even as we battle with our knowledge of the actual technologies of power?

In *Shaping Technologies* we undertake re-readings of past debates, and anticipations of future ones, weigh utopian visions against dystopic nightmares, perhaps to arrive at assessments that suggest sobriety and a ‘cool’ consideration of the cold touch of the machine, as well as of the heat of the fuel that animates it. We report the latest on surveillance, excavate histories of tech novelty, envision possibilities and examine blueprints and read the road maps to the futures that lie before us.

By doing all this we intend to ask: what kind of 'technological culture' exists, or may exist, outside of the cybernetic feedback loops of global products and services of capital? What space can we claim for freedom and function, safely out of reach of the apparatus of the state and the machine of the corporation? What leverage (to use a machine metaphor), if any, do we have to act – in haste, with urgency and intelligence – in these times?

Our work at Sarai is both with and about technology. Not only this Reader (which could never have been edited without editors discussing contents online, and contributors sending in articles and images by e-mail), but everything that we do is enabled by the choices that we make about which machines, techniques and software to use, and how. Our practices are inflected by the technological choices that we make on an everyday basis. This is because we give primacy to the realities of urban South Asia, and to the different histories and practices of communications that exist within this world.
These are histories of improvisation and creativity with machines. These are contentious and fraught legacies of the interaction of the daily lives of people and the agendas of power. All of this brings in its wake specific and everyday political questions. Our intent is to always ask - “Who controls and governs the flow of knowledge that accretes to a particular technology or a practice?” This insistence on qualified questions and particularity of contexts is distinct from general, ideological statements for or against technology in the abstract. We are conscious that in articulating this insistence, we are registering a refusal to enter the binary of technofetishism and technophobia that marks the frugal discourse on technology that exists in contemporary South Asia, especially in India. To do this is to refuse to celebrate big dams or nuclear power (as the governing technocracies of South Asia have done), and at the same time to refuse to buy into the largely anti-technological rhetoric of what has passed for an ‘alternative’ political and cultural imagination. For us, the contents of this Reader suggest that the search for a third way that neither fetishises nor condemns is possible, and timely. In its own way, the Reader is itself a gesture of affirmation towards this possibility.

Editorial Collective
Delhi/Sydney/Amsterdam
February 2003