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The Grand Tour: Art in Second Life

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ART IN SECOND LIFE

"What I have observed in entertainment forms ... is that society is observing itself more. People are able to observe each other on the Net, able to observe each other interact in Second Life and able to observe each other in the second-order artworks that created to communicate highly personalized interactive works."

- Christy Denna

- MELINDA RACKHAM & CHRISTIAN MCCREA

"In digitized social networks there is no place for psychologically defined notions of personality as a cohesive, definable whole. Identity manifests through notational distributions found in multiple profiles across various platforms... For these articulated identities [now known as versionals] connection is the vital point of communication; not the content, not the geophysical inflection, not the biologically-saturated ties linked to survival, competition, and traditional concrete community building."

- Netwurker Mez

"Simulations only offer an abstraction of situations, not of reality."

- Christian McCre

THE ARRIVAL

A wave rushes and folds neatly on origami shoals. A spotted sky sputters into indecisive clarity. Land pops. Land rises. Lines rush out like ribbons. Names, then faces, then bodies and clothes. Bit by bit, the elements drop into place. Our tour will begin in five minutes.

Lives are spent in search of other lives, alternatives for our selves and the indiscreet other voices standing on the edge of the void. Here on the beach before the tour, beings pop out of the ether, arriving through their magical invitation. Hello, you. Hello, you. Is that so-and-so? Great tail, where did you get that frock?

Linden Labs' desire to have a place for 'everybody' really touches the core of the organisation of SL, but the actuality is that not everybody is interested. However, the everybody of SL is the body of the every. Types and characters, personas and people iterate and shift unlike anywhere and anywhen else in virtual history. The identikit Ikea catalogue of SL's personality and appearance matrices are as much about their mutability as their oddity.

As the guests arrive for the tour, appearances shift as characters pose like dolls being undressed by unseen children. Many are unsure, and yet to decide how they will appear, even after they redraw, for this new event. Tonight's tour is an experiment in critically engaging with the creative projects, performances and potentials of SL artistic practice, organised for The Good the Bad and the Ugly -empyre- discussion forum.

BEARING WITNESS

Those in our pony tour group who have visited before, help the newer, less experienced members to observe proper SL etiquette and to ride their ponies correctly. Some stragglers have reconstituted outside the Odyssey building and are battering walls with their fresh new avatar bodies, others are flying around the ceiling. Some have gone exploring and are now submerged underwater wondering why they can still breathe, and other are roaming through SL's vast and vacant architectural spaces.

A certain self consciousness rustles through our crowd and several disappear to redress what they feel are visual inadequacies or inappropriate choices for today's activity. First life galleries don't sell cosmetic surgery and punk haircuts, more's the pity, but here everybody checks their dress code after the birth from the never-never land of their computer's memory buffer. Avatars reappear in different genders and colour schemes; with wings, tails and some delightful new frocks. The sparks of friendships and intimacy are igniting as inventory items are generously shared by those eager to learn and eager to teach.

Spaces like Odyssey provide performing and exhibiting artists an environment in which to ask fundamental questions about art, culture, entertainment and the nature of reality. Most do not see this environment as a simulation of another, external physical space - rather their work seeks to engage with the native attributes of coded environments.

Here the individual ethereal, plasmic, aural and physical body is conjoined with the persistent electronic body of the avatar. We feel his/her feelings, react to her/his stimuli - as aware of his/her in-world presence as we would be of a phantom amputated limb. We have come a long way from the base-camp of well trodden writings on alterity, and the otherness explored through the early days and Muds and Moos. We are collective, we are all queer, we have melded. Our quest[ion]s are different, our entertainment reflects this.

But we have mused for far too long and need sustaining engagement.

The tour guides explain:

Seizing the opportunity to try one of Babel's works Marina Regina jumps onto the harmless looking red plastic chair which is mounted on the large orange painting Avatar on Canvas.

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Our tour will begin in two minutes. We mount our pink, blue or yellow steeds and teleport to Odyssey.

"Does morphic resonance happen in Second Life as the formless cohesive element? Can an avatar have DNA? Complexity looks at interacting elements and asks how they form patterns and how the patterns unfold, [because] they're never be finished."

- Jacquie Clarke



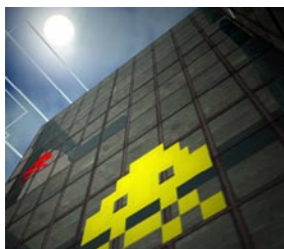
Marina Regina looks at Gazeria Babeli's Avatar on Canvas.



Avatar on Canvas Gazeria Babeli with Marina Regina interacting.



Avatar on Canvas Gazeria Babeli with Marina Regina interacting.



Email Invaders.

Nothing seems to happen .. then the cohesion of her body disintegrates. She is both stretched and squished, her limbs attached in oddly unfamiliar patterns, distorted, deformed, and scratching uncontrollably... Marina still walks and talks and she is clearly unconcerned about a return to normalcy. In fact she seems to enjoy enforced shape shifting!

Our avatars, our new breed of golden code, our selves are held, gently cupped, by their networks, by memories, by fantasy, by potentialities. As the tightly knit pattern unravels, they do not disintegrate depleted, but form other associations. New threads and strings emerge, electronic mucous spans the gaps between, glittering in the orange intensity of an SL sunset.

A series of bodies gathers wherever they can; to merely meet people is its own artform in the endless vacant lot. All appearances are deviances in the truest sense; triggers and toggles from central values on a series of scales. As the tour progresses, eyes dart across the polygon mesh. Borders have melted between the group but remnants of collective anxiety are still telepathically cast between species.

PERSISTENCE

Time is the medium we live in...
...
...
*...to surrender to something
is a feeling which we want to have.*"
BRIAN ENO

While Brian Eno was addressing the North American Premiere of 77 Million Paintings at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, four Second Life versions of 77 Million Paintings concurrently entertaining in-world fans. Built by SL artist Annabeth Robinson and placed across four art venues, each installation was unique, streaming generative sounds, and offering Eno "extras"

Building versions of off-world installations is not Robinson's usual operating mode , rather she addresses the complaint that SL is a lonely desolate experience. The majority of her art works require playful participation (whether known or unknown) of avatars to animate them. This interaction may be by touch, collision or chat, or more subtly by surveillance where the artwork scans for avatars in close proximity, pulls data from them, then generates a visual or sonic event.

An early work, Email Invaders ,requires that the audience send an email to either red or yellow space invaders, which will change size on a towering glass wall, dependant on the length of the email. This methodology of utilising elegantly simple work within the walls of SL scripting language overcomes its well documented narrow parameters. She refers to her working space - The Pencil Factory at the Port – as sketchbook, rather than a studio.

Second life is a persistent medium, so rather than operating within a static technological or art-historical context, this work and other works are always functioning, always "on". The gallery doors do not shut at 6pm. The projectors do not turn off.

Robinson's visual metaphor for this constant consumption, for the fragility of self in a persistently present world, is ironically titled 'You Demand Too Much of Me.' This sensor/time based sculpture decays in direct relationship to it's audience numbers – to how much it is on display, looked at, surveilled. More avatars present means the sculpture will disappear,



"Visiting Gazira Babeli's retrospective exhibition Collateral Damage is a bit like entering an Alice in Wonderland world, simultaneously magical and uncanny. Describing herself as a 'code performer' Babeli makes use of the elastic virtual physics of the digital terrain to create interactive art works where audience interaction sets off a series of playful, unpredictable and sometimes disturbing animations. Her Andy Warhol inspired work Second Soup traps your avatar in a looped animation within the soup can ('You love pop art but pop art hates you!' the work tells you). Another work, Come Together enables audience avatars to morph and merge into a collective living sculpture."

- Kathy Cleland



Avatars flowing through Adam Nash's sonic scapes.

"For artwork, the possibilities are enormous. I also enjoy the empty spaces. It feels like a dream or a like a post-plague society. The structures remain intact. You can go into most places, but you don't own them. You don't have to socialize. This is what initially drew me into Second Life. For the first 3 or 4 months, I had no friends and would walk around and explore. I saw desire embedded in infinite real estate -- a sort of extension of Los Angeles."
 – Scott Kildall

block by block, until it is non-existent. Then when there is nothing to look at any more and it is left alone, it slowly reappears one block at a time, like a depleted Terminator reconstituting itself until whole, only to disappear again.

Like Adam Nash, Robinson is pushing the parameters of live in-world generated music and visuals. Her Avatar Harp sound installation creates tones when an avatar or other physical object moves within its physical space. Flying through the work, the tones raise in pitch closer to the centre.

While Robinson's works resonates between walls, inside the gallery space, in clearly defined art arenas, Nash's works are more al fresco, venturing into the vast often derided open public spaces of SL. Embedding his poetic, reactive responsive works in SL ground gives them an element of accessibility. The park environment - a commons free of perverse advertising, and not adverse to instigating queer moments, returns art to the domain of people.

While buildings in SL can possess an air of the possessed, the open land between buildings are not the facsimiles of landscape art, but enable the planting of flowers of doubt and surprise. Adam's sonic poems free flow like the art of perpetual, uninterrupted movement, adapting motion to obstacles in the environment. The fluidity of the electro-plasmic body, the gaps and chasms between us, and between us and art are momentarily bridged in-world, in these temporal zones. We flock and swarm between spaces, around spaces, we are dynamic space.

Simulations only offer an abstraction of situations, not of reality. In turn, situations, already abstract, are built entirely out of our expectations and needs. Not every race is thrilling. Not every city is riddled with crime. Simulation is stained with aesthetics.

Artist and curator Margeurite Charmante discusses the layer building in an essay on Second Life in the Ludic Society Magazine which connects it to literary ideas of fantasy worlds from Karl Popper, Jorge Lois Borges and others:

Second Life remains attractive as a set of rules (a game?), a willfully taken constraint, a bondage. Like any good bondage it liberates us from our freedom... Accept a game as a set of rules, then the Second Life world is a game, the player is tied painfully close to the limitations of network traffic and access points. As surplus to those limitations by the technological topography, a set of trading rules is superimposed by a game industry monopoly. Now the bond is strong enough that even businessmen, anti-tech hustlers and a Jedermann find SL equally attractive - for chatting and trading with each other, for sex and lollies.

With multi-model and multi-medium art group Second Front, the line between similitude and the multiple reals is ripe material. Performances by the group often centre around dividing the differences again and again; avatars watch videos from the real world, or dance around a portal connecting to footage from a real place. One of the SLbrities of the group, Man Michinaga (Patrick Lichty), occupies a life not dissimilar to that of artists in the new virtuality squaring up against the tough circumstances of the city a hundred years ago. Scavenging for materials but never dry for inspiration, the SL artist quests like any other for situations to abstract.

Man Michinaga is an origami artist, true in shape and process but drenched in the paradox of not quite being there. Totally urbanised, but as feral and scavenging as any real person. Sneaking about the place looking for opportunities, code, friends. Others relaise SL's potential and perverse appeal—like fellow Front member and mediated artist Scott Kildall.

Second Front's movements are devout to the empyrean divide of the first and second worlds. On October 4th, 2007, the Front performed at Odyssey inside Second Life and Brussels, Belgium, a city already virtualised by its position in the global body politic. iMAL (Interactive Media Art Laboratory) was connected to 'The Gate', a portal zone that spat a videofeed back to the Laboratory, while images from Brussels was spat back to The Gate. Acting less like a two-way mirror than a reflecting pool, people on both sides were happy to play with the ripples in the water and watch the stars dance.

Members of the troupe were arranged around and on the neo-baroque Gate, twitching, bleeping, clothes in flux. How exactly one can experience the performance is also in flux; is SL presence any more perfect an experience of a doubly-virtual scenario than a streaming video of the event? In watching performances such as that at The Gate, audiences are generally treated to a ritualised version of events already occurring in Second Life. The world is abundant, almost Olympian, populated by a race of excessive, outlandish avatars. The world as flattened fantasy zone, and the world as lived, bricked-in reality. This offers a dense plane of signs and meanings for artists to interpret; everything in a sense, comes ready to be converted into art of some form. The Gate is an evolution of Rodin's Gates of Hell, a design originally meant to disavow constructed meanings and literally force the visitor to visit a kind of sculptural and kinetic hell before they could pass through. The magical threshold for Second Life is sculptural in a different sense, where artists can make images from both worlds connect, but the trick is to understand who precisely is travelling – player or avatar - and into precisely where.

NEVER VIRTUAL

Environmental architect R. Buckminster Fuller, knowing full well the trappings of utopian fervour, foregrounded the practical manifestations of errors and coincidence as design allegories. The history of virtual space, going back to pre-linguistic uses of gypsums and chalks to demarcate boundaries, bears out the narrative. We build in dreams. We learn to build in dreams. We build dreams through learning. And so on.

Technology and especially this monstrous phenomena called virtuality was Fuller's bugbear; it was and still is powered not by metaphors but an existing history, going back to these first representational arts, by which we placed faith in exteriority to the self.

It is precisely their Second Life-ness which makes them zones of purest design and art. The properties of a world such as Second Life lend themselves to exploratory movements in design. The mutable avatars, capable of flight, are in a sense the perfect subjects of utopian architecture, with all the unintended consequences that entails. With no restrictions, the vernacular of space need no longer be vernacular.

To describe an environment such as Ars Virtua as a gallery is to already shortcut the densities and opportunities of Second Life art spaces. Fuller's notion springs to life here and everywhere that a zone of machinic design opens up. Ars Virtua is an engine-space, chewing through intuitions and artworks, audiences and permutations. The ability for the space to ephemeralise and create cross-world architectural art jokes is one of the more potent and positive instances of a living gallery to date.

Brad Kligerman's AVAIR residence in Second Life was an utterance of distance, an occupation with how virtual communities affect our personal ecologies and surrounding objects. His approach to the process of virtualised objects was to reignite the process we are already familiar with; built machines handle Calibration, Analogy and Mutation of data from Second



The Bitfactory Exhibition Space.



The Gate by Adam Nash is an evolution of Rodin's Gates of Hell.

"The avatars that question the technotopian ideal of "always young, always beautiful" are my favorites...the usual avatar, or worse yet, the remediation of the real life appearance, is completely at odds with the Linden rhetoric. In many ways, it is the well-known axiom of giving the starving person a vast menu, and not knowing what to order, they get a cheeseburger for its familiarity."
 – Patrick Lichty

”You know Second Life is potentially so Queer! It sits in that multidimensional intersection of difference - where one type of marginalisation cannot be separated from the other, but is intertwined and connected.“
 -- Ricardo Peach



Brad Kligerman's AVAIR at Ars Virtua

Life to reinterpret and reuse existing materials already available. Our tour group dances and chats in Ars Virtua for some time.

*Are we visiting art?
 Are our avatars presence making art?
 Are we socialising?*

Spaces and buildings become reinterpreted data; spikes of colour and light flux and shift. The real mutation is not in the process of material uses, but in the process of their deployment in art. It is the art process which is being ephemeralised, not virtual space, or even real space. The events to promote the residency were, in every sense, the purpose of the residency.

Kligerman's work transposes a concern for the uncanny everyday world into Second Life; into a world where uncanniness is in the soil and sea. Everyday objects for us literally take on new dimensions, or the rules of geometry shatter. The doubts and concerns about how to comprehend the role of art melted away into air:

REMEDICATION

On March the 16th, 1982, artist Joseph Beuys began his work at the Documenta 7 festival, planting the first of his 7000 Oaks in order to spread concern for the diminishing forestry on the once-green world. Each oak was paired with a freestanding basalt column, a ritual marker of importance that would be as legible to pre-lingual times as it would be in a wholly virtual sphere. Artists Eva and Franco Mattes took up the challenge to mirror the 7000 Oaks project by distributing 7000 trees and stones in Second Life on the 25th anniversary of

”SL need more vitriol and burning tyres to become alive.“ – Ana Valdés



Eva and Franco Mattes, 7000 Oaks Project

Beuys' original project.

What does it mean for environmental, or land art for that matter, to be replicated in virtual worlds? The environmental scenario for a multi-user computer simulation is on the surface very bleak; thousands of hours of computer use go into a single hour of normal traffic in Second Life. Yet the Mattes' reworking of Beuys is never silent on the issue of the real, engaging with both the newly-ritualised process of 'planting' and the 25 years since Beuys' original concern, in which his type of work could only be more urgent than ever.

The Mattes rearticulate important elements of 20th Century art history by repositioning photography and collectorship at the centre of their virtual tourism. Their work on Thirteen Most Beautiful Avatars acknowledges the Warhol antecedent in process but in practice develops something altogether new. In a webcam-infested world, portraiture has an all-new reflexive action.

The remediation of Chris Burden's Shoot at Odyssey was performed and watched in-world, documented in-world and now documentation is displayed in-world as photographs or video still on the Odyssey Gallery walls. The hilarity of this tripling and folding is not lost on an avatar audience, viewing a remediation of a remediation. Someone looks at something = Art.

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

If Cocteau's famous dictum that film is a frozen fountain of time holds true, then our experiences of Second Life, bound by the aesthetic of the tour, with powers of flight and instant movement, could be the entire garden.

The life which is second produces meanings about the first even without drawing back the bleeping, erratic curtain. Those continually searching for a raison (or is that, 'maison') d'etre for Second Life, wondering what the hype is all about, arrive in search of meaning in zones inhabited mostly by people looking for the same intensities, victories and pleasures, as well as the strivings, failings and flaws of the seedling art practices which exist in-world.

There is no grand surprise coming; the art phenomena of Second Life are articulating and rearticulating the art world's concerns at the same speed and register. It is not just art being simulated, but the life of the artist. If art serves to abstract in a difference sense than simulation, not to model situations but to remove them from their context for a moment, then where art and simulation meet we find a zone totally at odds with itself. Artists fold space and time to turn them into a newness which accelerates our experience. Simulations and games fold space and time to develop experiences which accelerate newness.

The experiment-engine of Second Life offers potential; in a sense, that is all it offers. The tour residents undertake on every visit is, a tourism utterly unlike the virtual worlds before it, or the game-worlds competing for the current clock cycles of our computers. A garden of errors, glitches and twitches offers the visitor, the dweller and the provocateur ample fruit for harvest.

THE ORIGINAL TOUR WAS CURATED BY SL RESIDENTS LYTHE WITTE (CHRISTY DENA), ANGRYBETH SHORTBREAD (ANNABETH ROBINSON), MAN MICHINAGA (PATRICK LICHTY), DOESI BECK (STEPHAN DOESINGER), RICARDO PARAVANE (RICARDO PEACH), BELLA BOUCHARD (KATHY CLELAND), ADAM RAMONA (ADAM NASH), AND RUBAIYAT SHATNER (JAMES MORGAN).
 -EMPYRE- AUGUST 2007, FACILITATED BY MELINDA RACKHAM, [HTTP://WWW.SUBTLE.NET/EMPYRE](http://www.subtle.net/empyre)
 THANK YOU TO DAVID CRANSWICK FOR WRANGLING THE D.LUX PONY CLUB PONIES, [HTTP://WWW.DLUX.ORG.AU](http://www.dlux.org.au)
 - MARGEURITE CHARMANTE'S "3RD LIFE PLAYSURE: TERTIUS ORBIS MEMORANDUM", LUDIC SOCIETY MAGAZINE, ISSUE 4

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Eva and Franco Mattes Shoot performance documentation at Odyssey.

”There are your standard dwarves and gnomes and monsters; there a whole heap of steampunk avatars, and some fantastic 3D animated sculptures that some people are using ... a huge elven community, a mermaid community, the neko women, and the panther women, some goth and grunge, a very high number of queer folk, particularly gay, lesbian and transsexuals, and some of the most famous furies from the grid.“
 – Angela Thomas



The tour is over.