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Because I am Not Here, Selected Second Life-Based Art Case Studies. Subjectivity, Autoempathy and Virtual World Aesthetics

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Graduate Program in Media Studies
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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BECAUSE I AM NOT HERE. SELECTED SECOND LIFE-BASED ART CASE
STUDIES: SUBJECTIVITY, AUTOEMPATHY AND VIRTUAL WORLD
AESTHETICS

(Spine title: Because I Am Not Here. Selected Second Life-Based Art Case
Studies)

Thesis format: Monograph

by

Francisco Gerardo Toledo Ramírez

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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entitled:

**Because I Am Not Here, Selected Second Life-Based Art Case
Studies: Subjectivity, Autoempathy and Virtual World Aesthetics**

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Arts

Date

Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

Abstract

Second Life is a virtual world accessible through the Internet in which users create objects and spaces, and interact socially through 3D avatars. Certain artists use the platform as a medium for art creation, using the aesthetic, spatial, temporal and technological features of SL as raw material. Code and scripts applied to animate and manipulate objects, avatars and spaces are important in this sense. These artists, their avatars and artwork in SL are at the centre of my research questions: what does virtual existence mean and what is its purpose when stemming from aesthetic exchange in SL?

Through a qualitative research method mixing distributed aesthetics, digital art and media theories, the goal is to examine aesthetic exchange in the virtual: subjectivity and identity and their possible shifting patterns as reflected in avatar-artists. A theoretical and methodological emphasis from a media studies perspective is applied to digital media and networks, contributing to the reshaping of our epistemologies of these media, in contrast to the traditional emphasis on communicational aspects. Four case studies, discourse and text analysis, as well as interviews *in-world* and via email, plus observation while immersed in SL, are used in the collection of data, experiences, objects and narratives from avatars Eva and Franco Mattes, Gazira Babeli, Bryn Oh and China Tracy.

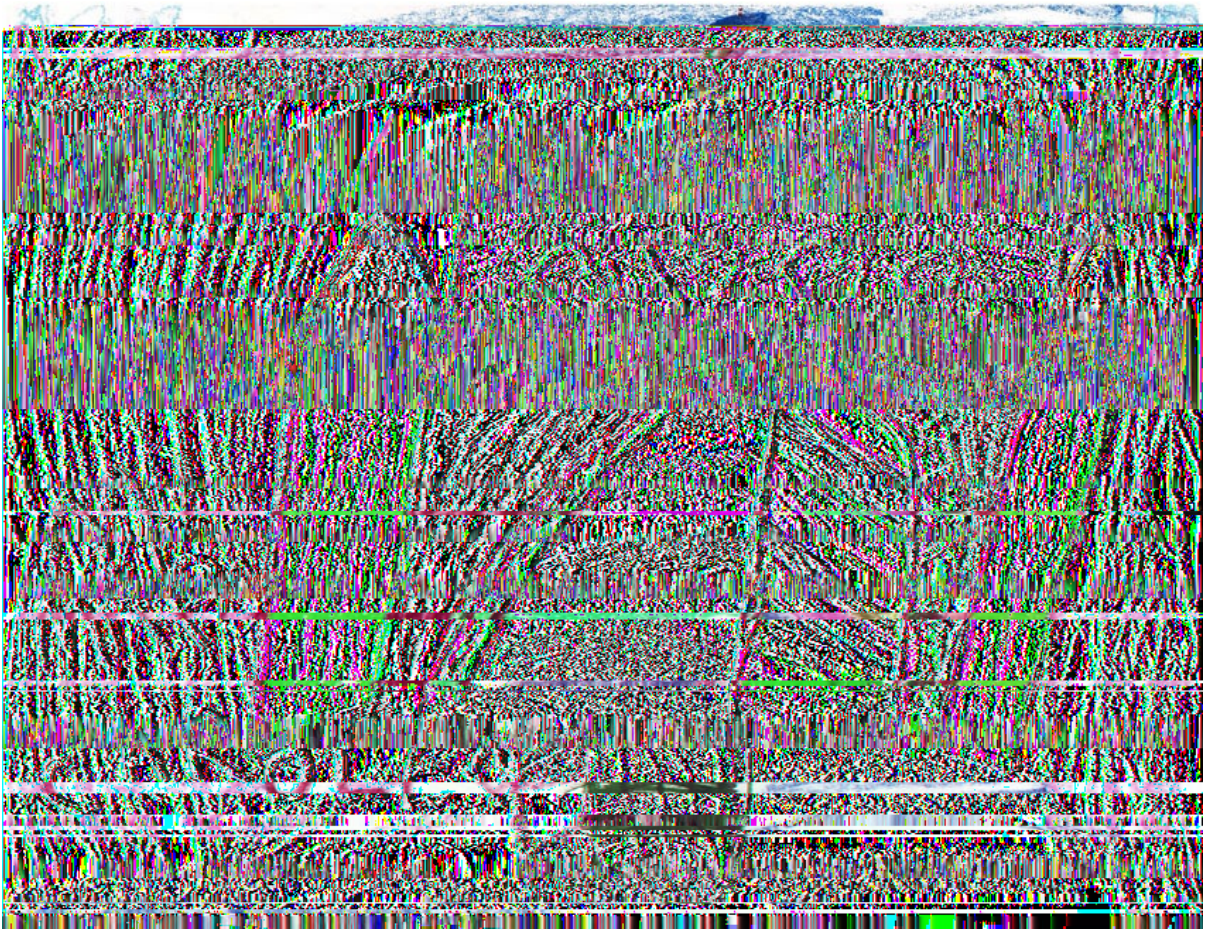
The findings confirm the role that aesthetic exchange in virtual worlds has in the rearrangement of ideas and epistemologies on the virtual and networked *self*. This is reflected by the fact that the artists examined—whether in SL or AL—create and embody avatars from a *liminal* (ambiguous) modality of identity, subjectivity and interaction.

Mythopoeia (narrative creation) and experiencing oneself as ‘another’ through multiplied identity and subjectivity are the outcomes of code performance and *machinima* (films created *in-world*). They constitute a *modus operandi* (syntax) in which *episteme*, *techne* and embodiment work in symbiosis with those of the machine, affected by the synthetic nature of code and *liminality* in SL. The combined perspective from media studies and distributed aesthetics proves to be an effective method for studying these subjects, contributing to the discussion of contemporary virtual worlds and art theories.

Keywords

Avatar, Second Life, Virtual Art, Virtual Worlds, Subjectivity, Liminality, Code, Performance, Identity, Self.

Acknowledgments



This is a drawing by my five-year-old daughter, Maebh, for my supervisor Dr. Carole Farber. It also served to cheer me up by providing my mind and eyes the chance to wander around the exquisite forms and textures during the long process of finishing this thesis.

First and foremost, my gratitude goes to Dianne, my wife. Without her diligent, accurate and resourceful support, this thesis would not have been possible. Second, thanks to Maebh, who provided incessant moments of joy, adrenaline and motivation over the course of this long journey.

My deepest gratitude to my two families: my in-laws Anna Mae and Earl, and my brother-in-law Darin here in Canada. In Mexico, my mother Celia, father Ramiro, brothers Ramiro

and Victor, and sister Claudia, were always there for me, and are present in the lines Maebh drew for Carole.

This thesis would not be possible without the careful revision and insightful revelations of my supervisor, Dr. Carole Farber. I also extend my warmest thanks to Drs. Anabel Quan-Hasse and Sharon Sliwinski for their valuable suggestions. I am honoured to have had them all as my professors and friends.

I want to express my gratitude to the four artists who participated in this study—Eva and Franco Mattes, Gazira Babeli, Bryn Oh, and China Tracy (Cao Fei)—for their generous time and valuable insight into their work and Second Life.

I want to also recognise my fellow students and colleagues at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, and the academic and administrative staff—thanks for your support during this endeavour.

Finally, my deepest gratitude and respect to the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Azcapotzalco in Mexico City for their unwavering support.

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Preface – Does the Virtual Exist?: Research Design

A substantial part of my decision to switch from being a designer to a visual artist in the early eighties is indebted to the pleasures of reading and writing. Those pleasures were instilled in me as soon as I learned to read (at four years of age) from my mother, who taught with the tenacity, (im)patience and severity of an obsessive clock-maker (she taught history and literature in primary and secondary school levels for over thirty-five years). Years later, as a young adult devoted to mastering the teaching of Italian, I rediscovered, in awe, the pleasure of reading one of my favourite writers (again): Italo Calvino, but this time in his native tongue.

Near the end of the twentieth century, Calvino imagined and reflected with remarkable insight on the contours and details of the aesthetic subjects to be present in an inescapable and fundamental dialogue for the next century. Throughout the ideas and, particularly, the images of *Six Memos for The Next Millennium*, Calvino displays master analytical skills, penetrating aesthetic arguments and encyclopaedic knowledge applied to the mission of imagining human creativity for the future, from an aesthetic perspective common to writers and visual artists. A world that he himself would not have the opportunity to attest to in person: Calvino died the morning of September 19, 1985, at the same time that my natal country (Calvino's dearest Mexico) was shaken by the strongest earthquake ever registered in the country's history. In *Six Memos*, Calvino shares a thoughtful reflection on the nature and the issues common to art practice through the image of a reversible metaphor: human behaviour as creativity, and creativity as human behaviour. Throughout the six essays—more exactly proposals, of which only five were finished before his sudden death—Calvino explored and displayed a variety of aesthetic diagnosis of human kind's soul in postmodern culture and time. *Six Memos* is a sophisticated and informed recommendation to the reader to welcome the task of deciphering the next millennium in the most lucid, humane and creative way possible.

In the *in absentia* conferences and according to philosopher Mario Perniola, Calvino outlines—apparently without the intention of doing so—arguments applicable today as

relevant *modes* of cultural creation in a society interpenetrated by technology, mass media and information. These *modes* are: *lightness*, *quickness*, *exactitude*, *visibility* and *multiplicity*.¹ From these (especially *lightness*, *visibility* and *multiplicity*), I have taken intellectual and visual inspiration relevant to my work over the past twenty years, for my master's thesis in new media art and, now, for the enrichment of definitions in my doctoral thesis around the virtual as a fundamental component of digital aesthetics. In this regard, what I am proposing in this dissertation is to study virtual world aesthetics from a Media Studies and a Distributed Aesthetics approach.

To illustrate the above, I cite two relevant examples. In “Lightness”, Calvino interrogates himself on the aesthetic and intellectual virtues of levity over and above weight. He mentions the current tendency for science (in the mid eighties of the twentieth century) to demonstrate how the world “is supported by the most minute entities” (1988 8) such as DNA, and atomic and subatomic particles. One interesting case—he says—is how something so immaterial and weightless as software, controls such bulky hardware or heavy machinery. Secondly, in “Quickness”, Calvino reflects on various writers and their style, underlining the crucial importance that the relationship between the *material* and *virtual* has on their respective creation; specifically, how quickness (both physical and mental) is key to *lightness* and brevity, which he so admires aesthetically (43). Pages ahead, one finds a pleasing yet accurate metaphor of the *virtual*: Calvino reminds us of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges and his ingenious idea of multiplying and reinventing himself as several mysterious writers. At the beginning of the 1940s, Borges imagined a series of books he wanted to write (*The Approach to Al’Mutásim* being the first) as *if they had already been written* by other (fictitious) authors in diverse languages and times. Borges goes even further by referring to and quoting very rare and specialised treatises (of his invention), all devoted to the study of those books: “[Borges’] task—says Calvino—was to describe and review this invented book” (50). Each of the texts

¹ “Of these [six conferences] only the first five have been written. They have, as an argument, the notions of lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity. These are terms that have great popularity because they seem to be interpreting, so to speak, the spirit of [today’s] time, that is, the tendency toward a technological post-industrial age.” (Perniola, my translation)

duplicates or multiplies conceptual spaces by referring to another text, and yet to other ones pertain to an imaginary (virtual) or real library.

As one can deduce here, Calvino declares himself in favour of lightness—“enraptured” with this property, as signalled in Borges—as nothing else than virtual selfhood, which, he thinks, is a necessary premise to articulate the aesthetic discourse on *lightness*.

Possibly borrowing the idea from Borges, Calvino’s *Six Memos* unveils various versions of himself sustaining interesting dialogues with his self as another self and, through these, with characters from the past, present and future for the purpose of discussing diverse intellectual and creative perspectives on art, creation, literature and their respective functions. In this fashion, Calvino uses writing and the history of literature as a *virtual sandbox*—or perhaps a Chinese shadow theatre—to keep us in awe through representations of worlds discovered, or to be discovered, by those various selves, always—as he confesses in “Visibility”—departing from a visual image. In this sense and with all proportion withstanding, Calvino proceeds as a virtual world player enmeshed in the possibilities of self-representation and narrative or plot-potentiality within a virtual environment like that of Second Life (SL).

To me, the nature of this comparison is a gateway to space-time, working in the (his) imagination, in which Borges’ method is reflected and re-enacted as a mythical space composed of different worlds, times and actors who speak and respond regardless of chronological time. Proceeding this way, Calvino traces an analogical map that synthesises the main characteristics of the virtual as the following:

1. It is a place not situated in any *real* (geographic) *site*, but it allows for (and actually depends on) the unfolding between the real being and ‘something’, someone ‘else’ with whom we experience space in first person (or in a sort of first-third person);
2. It is a *persistent* place in which parallelisms and symmetries take place (or not, leaving evidence of this dis-encounter); and
3. We can access this place through our senses, imagination and a ‘body’ or a presence that is *real* but not material. (1988 22-23)

What Calvino ultimately elaborated in *Six Memos* is a series of strategic questions about intimate relations with art, the elaboration of the idea of it, and how, founded ever since, the natural place of imagination is in the initial myth of the artist as his/her own invention: How does the ‘virtual’ become embedded in modern and contemporary art? How can the advance of media and technology in contemporary art be described? What is virtual art today (Calvino’s future)? How does the participation of media, science and technology currently fit and feed into the all-time human pursuit of *illusion* and *immersion*? How does one *enter* or get there? Although different and, in *rigour*, less specific, these questions have prefigured the research questions in my dissertation. The four main questions of my thesis express the quintessence of my object of study and the issues I wish to investigate, which consist of non conventional SL artists, their artwork, the features of these and the societal implications (and influences) that such aesthetic practices are producing as modifiers of SL *ethos*. In this sense my questions are centred around, but not exclusively limited to, the hows and whys of the subject:

- RQ01 How are SL-based art and meaning-making related, and why does this matter narratively? What is the contribution of SL-based artists to the advancement of new epistemologies of SL and virtual worlds and its theoretical renewal toward ‘reinventing’ the ethos of SL?
- RQ02 How do SL-based artists understand, perform, enhance and diffuse subjectivity (and multiple identity) in their own ontologies around embodying avatars who ‘play’ at being artists? What are the key aspects of this agency process, if any?
- RQ03 How is the aesthetic experience created and manifested in each of the selected SL based artists? What are the common and the specific characteristics of SL-based art forms? Their idiosyncrasy and cultural dynamic, their aesthetic elements? How might objects and experiences created by virtual artists in SL lead to the transformation of the concept of inhabiting *this* virtual world?
- RQ04 Why and how may a process such as *auto-empathy* lead to new paradigms in SL and by extension the sociability, art and cultural exchange in virtual worlds. What is the role of SL-based artists and the SL art community in the whole dynamic?

The above outlined about Calvino intersects but also runs in parallel with a core concept with regards to the articulation of aesthetics and technology, pointed out by Oliver Grau—although from a different perspective—in *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*:

The evolution of media of illusion has a long history, and now a new technological variety has appeared; however, it cannot be fully understood without its history. With the advent of new techniques for generating, distributing and presenting images, the computer has transformed the image and now suggests it is possible to “enter” it. (8)

Hence, the purpose of this initial detour revisiting Calvino and Grau is, besides affirming the existence of the virtual, to emphasise a position already taken in Art History and Aesthetic Studies that demonstrates how the virtual has always fit in the dominion of the history of human creativity, and how this happens usually through the metamorphosis of illusion and immersion. The study of SL aesthetic experiences is still scarce and limited, often deferred, despite the expansion and growth of “synthetic worlds” (Castronova 2005). To me, the relationship between contemporary art, virtual worlds and online interactive technologies constitutes a key subject within the general theory of virtuality, online techno-culture and electronic interactive art forms. In his 2003 book, Grau stresses a grounding point relevant to this: contemporary art history is incomplete without the inclusion of the impact of new media art on the theory of art and the image. For Grau, the art history of illusion and immersion constitutes an ‘embryonic’ function of art history, providing the analytical *continuum* and the material bases to study these ideas. It is precisely this *continuum* that deals with today’s understanding of a theory of image and art as capable of hosting current developments with computers, meaning that virtuality did not “make its first appearance with the technical invention of computer-aided virtual realities”:

recent and current encroachment of media and technology into the workplace and work processes is a far greater upheaval than other epochs have known, and, obviously, it has also affected large areas of art. Media art, that is, video, computer graphics and animation, Net-art, interactive art in its most advanced form of virtual art with its subgenres of telepresence art and genetic art, is beginning to dominate theories of the image and art. (Grau 3)

The SL-based artwork and the artist-avatars examined in this thesis might demonstrate the existence of a dense and dynamic metamorphosis of the aesthetic concepts, experiences, and images related to this kind of art, which in turn contributes to reshaping and dominating contemporary theories of art.

Throughout this thesis I entertain ideas that give ground to my theoretical frame approaching SL-based Art (Chapter 1). One of these is that virtual, bio, code, artificial intelligence and telepresence art exhibit a steady convergence between aesthetics, science, communication media and technology. Following a definition by Oliver Grau and, to some extent, by code and bio-artist Eduardo Kac, virtual belongs to the broader field of digital interactive electronic arts. In his book *Telepresence & Bio Art*, Kac sees virtual art as directly related to telepresence art, both belonging “to a larger entity known as electronic interactive art: an art based on the integration of telecommunications, robotics, human-machine interfaces, and computers. The ‘telepresence art’ of which I write here can be understood within the wider frame of electronic interactive art” (136). In my examination of artistic practices in SL, I relate this perspective with that of Campanelli around the term ‘blob’ “as introduced by American architect Greg Lynn in an article entitled: ‘Blobs (or Why Tectonics is Square and Topology is Groovy)’” (Campanelli 221). This is a suitable metaphor for virtual spaces, or the other way around: the SL virtual environment would illustrate quite well the temporal, transitional and adaptive ‘shape-less’ universe postulated by ‘blob’ theory and populated by ephemeral (but iterative) beings and objects *shaped* by informational patterns of data flow. In these worlds, objects and people display a latent and recurrent *shapelessness*, and then are immediately reconfigured by the aesthetic expression of users who trigger them by the ‘magic’ of code programming and scripting (Cramer).

An additional aspect of these phenomena involving space, time, perception and telepresence (which obviously involve identity, subjectivity and technological mediation) is that, as the case studies demonstrate, presence and absence become meaningful and technically operable from within *liminal* processes. Simply put, the aesthetic exchange in virtual interactive art is at the core of both projected (tele)presence and a sense of ‘individuality’ built from collective and shared notions about the digital, the distributed,

and the affective. The four artists in the case studies follow these paths: they constitute their raw matter in the virtual, stemming from the symbolic fusion of virtual *physis* and *tekhne*. Under these conditions, and similar to what happens with dreams and literature, one is ‘thrown’ into a contextual field of forces to interact with others (via avatars) in such a way that *telepresence* becomes a vector of subjectivity—a teleological, affective and narrative component stemming from *liminality* (in-between worlds).

This directly affected the selection of the four artists (among a larger number of other interesting ones reviewed during the time of my thesis proposal). On the one hand, all four of them—although from varying angles and aesthetic goals—create art involved with *liminality*, *telepresence* and identity play. On the other hand, they effectuate these operations with a remarkable critical sense of both virtual life and SL. In other words, the four artists selected for my case studies challenge the ethical and ontological bases of Linden Lab’s SL and artistically create remarkable artwork in and with the platform. For this very reason, I claim these artists are producing a shift in the ethos of SL. They are not the only ones, of course, but they are key representatives of the aesthetic shift mentioned above. Their innovative artwork in SL and their prestige and influence in virtual and real art scenes confirm this idea.

The four case studies here within demonstrate how the *aesthetic* character of these exchanges in the metaverse provide extended paths to understanding the state of current collaborative creativity aided by digital online networks and virtual interaction technologies. The first claim in this thesis is that this represents a paradoxical condition represented by the virtual world artist in symbiotic co-authorship with the (virtual) public, a formula that I have termed the *individually social*: people who produce and work in a technically enhanced and psychologically (and affectively) shared ‘mode’ of the self, are working with the collective, thereby transforming representation of that self and its subjectivity into fluid and mutable features, thanks to the conflation of distributed aesthetics and online networks.

A second claim in this thesis is that the study and explanation of these latter terms (distributed aesthetics and online networks), can be advantageously approached from a

combined media studies and digital (or virtual) aesthetics perspective. I have recently written about these phenomena in a chapter for a book entitled *The Immersive Internet*.² A good example of a combined perspective might be Kac himself who, in his artwork, discusses, theorises, documents, archives and proposes aesthetic cues, assuming these tasks to be integral to contemporary art praxis in virtuality. Reciprocally, it is almost impossible to fully appreciate Kac's artwork without due attention to (new) media modalities that his work assumes in his blog(s), website, flickr, YouTube and social networks. This method reflects the state to which online collaboration and technology in general are embedded in contemporary creativity. In contemporary theory of information aesthetics, this is called a *space of reciprocity* (which Munster—and others—claim to be absent from commercial mass media). This is amply examined in the context of my four case studies, and was indeed taken into account in the research methods and design for this study.

The method employed is a combination of qualitative research techniques and *in world* observation. The mixed perspective of distributed aesthetics and media studies is an epistemological platform for that *space of reciprocity*. From a methodological perspective, the case studies (devoted to exploring activities, processes and events) are one of the most effective modalities in qualitative research. They are designed to correlate collected information, virtual objects, artwork, other materials and content. Then, using the material from the interviews as a guideline for identity-play and *liminality*, I examine and reflect on how and why each artist assumes their virtual persona, and the way they do so. The four case studies are finally compared, interrogated or interrelated to consolidate further critical and theoretical elements to sustain the claim that SL-based art constitutes and propitiates a different version of what SL is.

In this fashion, the research questions were developed as a way of approaching virtual existence in SL and interpreting the dynamic aesthetic exchange in artwork created in the platform. This allows for a profound study of how the media-immersed characteristic of SL becomes decisive to grasping *liminality*, the *space of reciprocity*, and its features and

² Tiegländ, Robin and Dominic Power, editors. At Press. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

potentialities to shape the SL cultural landscape. Thus, my research method might be called a *qualitative inquiry* among artists in virtuality, employing different strategies of inquiry.

For the purpose of mixed media studies and distributed aesthetics perspectives, I have borrowed two theoretical framings: Munster's "*transversal technological studies*" (2006 24), which gives epistemic grounding to my method; and Lichty's *four-facets classification of virtual artwork*.

With evident echoes of Bolter & Grusin's "remediation approach" (1999), Munster sustains the idea that new media are not simply "substituting-by-changing" other media forms; rather, they are rearranging the conceptual taxonomies and paradigms for thinking about them, including the "reorganization of our epistemologies of media" (2006 24).

What is more, Vito Campanelli writes in *Web Aesthetics* that "the most convincing concepts" around the rearranging of our notions of the media are "Roger Fidler's *mediamorphosis* and Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's *remediation*" (136). According to the latter, new media includes and transforms "features of previous media" (136) which means, essentially, a new mediation: what they call (re)mediation of older media through new one.

In my research method design, this translated into the emphasis that a perspective from media studies (on digital aesthetics) should not exclusively be focused on the communicational dimension of the discipline (the pure delineation of form through medium specificity analysis). An aesthetic approach to the artists and artwork like this would run the risk of being insufficient or not insightful; rather, it is the "mutability of media forms" (Munster 24) and their 'remediation' that should be its focus:

This project proposes and puts into motion the idea of transversal technological studies. The transversal can be configured as a diagram rather than a map or territory: directional lines cross each other, forming intersections, combining their forces, forming and reforming the entire field in the process. (Munster 2006 24)

In other words, through my method, I approach the study of these artists and their work from a multifaceted perspective, while being aware of the transitional and multi-mediated forces at play in the configuration of the technologically visible and the aesthetically expressible in their art.

Lichty's four interrelated facets of "artistic praxis in virtual worlds" (Lichty Translation 1) are key when developing an informed discussion and examination of the effects of art in SL: "that, as Grau states, an analysis can be made in terms of comparison to history, but in relation to it as well as contemporary practice in terms of phenomenology, aesthetics and origination" (Grau cited in Lichty Translation 1). In short, these facets are modality, audience, context and formalism:

Modality refers to the location and vector direction of the work's relation between worlds, such as importing physical work into Second Life, or the realization of SL-based works in the physical... Audiences for virtual work are often small, as servers can only manage limited numbers of avatars (usually 50-75 per region) and presuppose certain educational and technical resources... From this, it can be said that context is as cultural as technical, as virtual worlds often have their own specific cultures, and art created for one milieu may not translate well to another. And lastly, ... in context with the formalism of virtual worlds ... there is only a simulation of formalism. However, one could say that there is formalism in code ... The methods of modeling, texturing of objects and virtual projection define a formalism for virtual worlds. (Lichty Translation 1-3)

SL-based artworks, like the ones examined in this dissertation, constitute forms of art that emphasise less form and composition in favour of configuration, behaviour and negotiation of meaning. In this way, virtual performances, interventions and installations, code and time-based art, cybrid practices connecting Actual Life (AL) and Second Life (SL) transform the creation of unidirectional messages into open-ended circuits of shared elaboration. Similarly, the properties of inhabiting a 'space' in which public and artists are located remotely in the physical world, and yet are capable of interacting and exchanging meaning, transforms the role of the public from passive receptors to active participants, a point also made clear by D'Aloia and Grau, and theorist-artists such as Patrick Lichty and Domenico Quaranta. Kac shares this metaphor of "entering" or inhabiting the image: drawing from Virilio, Baudrillard and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Kac emphasises the role that blurring-blending of the tangible

corporeality (the real) and the virtual (the intangible representation) manifests at the core of the digital aesthetic experience in this kind of art. In the process of sharing and exchanging meaning between artists and residents of SL, input originated in the ‘physical world’ also affects the ‘virtual space’ and vice versa, which is a particularity of immersive virtual reality:

This means that several people from different countries could meet on-line and interact through their graphic projections using telecommunication systems, which could be coupled to telerobots. ... One could say that the fusion of the medium and the real is specially true in telepresence, since one can actually perform and change things in the real world from far away. (Kac 139-141)

I have used this ontology of virtual art in the examination of SL-based art, emphasising the important functions of performative and participative meaning-making, and the affective exchange from the individual to the social, which creates, enhances and weaves narratives forming the *space of reciprocity*. Munster has crafted a conception of embodiment as an alternate arrangement of lines of expression for interpreting the effects of coding and scripting on the homogenisation occasioned by the body’s components when translated to the digital order. I propose this might be assumed as a multi-sensory aesthetic, a multimodal one functioning to create a complex *spatialisation*. In the same sense, and as revealed through the artists’ exemplary work examined in each case study, the position of the body in the face of digital aesthesia remains *insoluble*. Munster is correct when saying:

The aesthetics of information culture is concerned with modes of sensory engagement in which distributed spaces and temporal variations play crucial roles. In engaging with and visualizing bodies and in responding to material parameters, *new media simultaneously change our understanding of and relationship with or own bodies*. No longer can we consider the body an antinomy of code; its incorporeal capacities are simultaneously amplified and divided from its physicality as we come to think of digital embodiment as a process of living in information culture: the labor of folding corporeality and code across its many differentiated instantiations. (Munster 184, my emphasis)

These approaches are useful in combination with a mixed inquiry method based on exploratory *case studies*. These contribute to designing and organising the collection, analysis and interpretation of observations (Yin); to outlining interpretive lines pointing to the enhancement of SL theory; and, by extension, to facilitating interpretations and

raising conclusions in the form of specialised narratives for research on virtual worlds in general. This is a sort of *concurrent methodological strategy* (Creswell 2003), the malleability of which permits an amalgamation of case studies, unstructured interviews and direct personal observation conducted by Lacan Galicia (my avatar), combined with the two theoretical framings, strategies of collection and sorting of documents, texts and other meaningful data by me in AL.

My research was centred on knowing and interpreting artistic personalities virtually represented in an interactive environment: examining the fluctuations of identity, embodiment, subjectivity and their exchange (or transference) between AL and SL. Approaching the ‘identity and subjective variability’, artist by artist, was the goal of interviews. An archive of my conversations with each of the four artists is presented in the Appendix of this thesis.

Lacan Galicia (my avatar) spent in excess of 500 hours in SL from November 2009 to January 2012, most of the time visiting *Immersive*, Odyssey and a few places operated by Western University and the Faculty of Information and Media Studies. Between October and December of 2008, Lacan gained experience in SL, moving from novice to seasoned avatar. With my background in graphic design, visual art and computer imaging, Lacan began creating moveable sculptures and structures, which led to his awareness of existent art scenes in SL.

This coincided with an upgrade to a premium account in the summer of 2010, which led to Lacan’s dedication to formal research after my thesis proposal was approved. His research archive consists of a formal database for each of the four artists: images for each artist, email correspondence, direct recordings from SL, news and reports from research journals, Lacan’s participation in events and performances in SL through his various memberships in artistic institutions within the platform. A back up of this archive (3.4 GB) is maintained on an external hard drive in my office. Lacan began with a list of six artists, from which two were later eliminated—Man Michinaga and Fau Ferdinand. The four remaining artists were chosen due to their critical standing in the world of virtual art and SL, artwork that revolves around subjectivity and identity play, and the availability of artwork across media.

The overall contribution of a mixed methodological design that is subject to scrutiny by academics and virtual world researchers³ is of value for a specialised audience in the fields of contemporary and digital art, virtual worlds research and media studies. In other words, such forms of SL-based art imply the connection and reconfiguration of older and newer media. They reshape, in the process, our own epistemologies about virtuality, art and media, and this constitutes a powerful resource for the conceptualisation and shaping of the cultural landscape of virtual worlds at large. Thus, to reiterate, a strategic inquiry process that seems appropriate for these artists and their artwork is precisely developing an exploratory case study of them. I believe it is possible to link the elements from which one can develop the consolidation of information structured around the construction of “*social explanations to intellectual puzzles* [...] The elements which a researcher chooses to see as relevant for a description or exploration will be based, implicitly or explicitly, on a way of seeing the social world, and on a particular form of explanatory logic” (Mason 6).

In this context, the SL-based art case studies in this thesis can be seen as a challenging and creative way of experimenting the performative nature of digital information, while at the same time taking advantage of the massive dissemination and collaboration of online networking and hyper textual structures of communication that permeate SL. This makes possible the convocation, by the same *medium*, of gazes, narratives, intellectual analyses and direct and indirect collaboration. In fact the ‘feedback’ gained (or built) by the artists, as one will see in the next chapters, is in great deal subsumed as an integral component of the whole *aesthesis* at play. This is due to the instantaneity of the work as well as the systemic narrative character (as part of the ‘performativity’ taking place), not to mention the fact that the conventional cult to the genius of the artist has been disassembled and proliferated and—particularly in the radical case of Gazira Babeli, which follows as Chapter 4—obliterated entirely.

³ For more on this subject see Volume 3, Number 1 (2010) of the Journal of Virtual Worlds Research at <http://jvwresearch.org/index.php/past-issues/31-the-researchers-toolbox> .

In the context of the theory of distributed cognition, this group of processes belongs to *representational media*. In “Individually Social,”⁴ a chapter I authored for a collective project on the Web of the future, I have referred to this latter term as a preferable analytical component for a much needed multimodal approach to the merging of views. Lately, representational media, distributed aesthetics, semantic and social networks, and virtual worlds are often envisioned as the future 3D web in which VWs and SNs, having been successfully merged, would potentiate the property of digital media to not only transliterate other media, but to redistribute them as well. This study of SL art has taken into consideration the factors intervening in the highly charged experiences of cognitive processing and aesthetic experimentation related to the expression of subjectivity that is reinforced hyper-mediatically in SL. This enables the artists examined to produce content, knowledge and culture in a virtual social environment, while simultaneously allowing them to experiment with their own identity through a group of artifacts, tools and other powerful channels of communication at hand. As such, the design of an avatar’s appearance and the effects on its identity ends up being revalued in that it has more influence on the reconfiguration of the expression of selfhood than it initially appears. How the behaviour, self esteem, and even the mythologised narratives one creates through an avatar, modify the attitude and idea of oneself. Having mentioned these ideas, it is clear to me that the field of research on the use of avatars to interact in a 3D space as a form of art, web browsing and/or social networking device is feasible, and would be benefited by—besides the default digital technology and computer sciences approaches—the new epistemological understandings stemming from media studies and, most importantly, from digital aesthetics.

It is my belief that the merging of semantic and interactive virtual ‘tools’ is a question that can be advantageously discussed from a multidimensional perspective like the one applied in my research method for this thesis. Finally, the work of Eva and Franco Mattes, Gazira Babeli, Bryn Oh and China Tracy demonstrates that an avatar-artist is a

⁴ Individually Social: From Distribute Aesthetics to New Media Literacy. Approaching the Merging of Virtual Worlds, Semantic Web and Social Networks. *The Immersive Internet*. Editors Robin Tieglund and Dominic Power. Palgrave Macmillan. At press.

good model to study if one pursues the objective of preserving and defending the powerful and amplified properties of the digital body and subjectivity in the virtual. The artists reviewed in this thesis stand firmly for preserving the affective liberating capabilities of materialising and (re)embodying digital aesthetics through mutable and flickering identities and three-dimensionally represented ‘selves’. In different and creative ways, they ‘fight’ against the disturbing mainstream tendency that seeks to unify virtual worlds and social and commercial online networks, riskily flattening identity, representation and personality of mature avatars, into one forcefully predictable humanoid projection—a stable, traceable ubiquitous 24/7 *travatar* that represents one, but always linearly and in the same way. Or better said, that represents the reductive abstraction of the self as consumer, defined by statistical data on the side of political and corporative power around techno utopian views towards a mystified Web 3.0 of the future.

An overview of this thesis can be seen at:

http://prezi.com/dv576cprsb3k/selected-sl-based-art-case-studies/?auth_key=cc1a5a607239d323315cac1f8843a0bf13b761e2

Chapter 1

1 Second Life-Based Art, Virtual Worlds and Distributed Aesthetics – Overview

In the introduction, a simple question is posed: Does the virtual exist? An essay on art, narrative and creation follows, which connects with a brief presentation of the nature of my research problem and my thesis' questions.

Chapter 1 begins with a definition of the term Second Life-Based Art within the context of electronic virtual art. My purpose is to present the definition as the outcome of the intersection of three axiological components:

1. *The concept of the virtual*: from its main features to its functions in the process of artistic work and aesthetic experiences in virtual art. SL based art is inscribed in the larger context of electronic interactive virtual art, outlining why this matters.
2. *The aesthetic perspective* applied in this thesis, which is in reality a blend of the ideas of Distributed Aesthetics, Electronic Interactive Virtual Art and Diffuse Aesthetics: SL based art may provide relevant new elements for approaching virtual world theory from the field of aesthetics.
3. *The interaction between SL-based art, technology and communication*, a task to be accomplished from a perspective anchored in Media Studies. What is essentially characteristic of each of the SL-based artwork studied in this thesis, is that each of them approaches tests and ratifies the flux of data reshaping and modifying our epistemologies on the virtual, telepresence and the digital.

The next section in the chapter presents the basic ontologies in this thesis. Thus, as a general proposition, artists and artwork are mapped to a theoretical framing borrowed from a number of authors studied during the writing process of my specialised comprehension exam. These authors address the particular concepts of auto-empathy, liminality, flickering significant and meaning-making mutability, with which I will develop more properly, and in depth, the case study model for each SL based artist.

The last section of the chapter moves briefly in the adjacent territories of distributed cognition design, visibility, representation and the always-pertinent discussion around the work of art at the time of digital reproduction. The final remarks of the chapter call to attention the epistemic and heuristic nature subjacent to both, my thesis goals and research questions, and the methodological design with which I will approach each case study in their respective chapter. The purpose is to ‘locate’ *Lacan Galicia*, my own SL avatar, into the theoretical framing, so ‘he’ becomes presented in the role of a preferred *in-world* witness, in charge of ‘virtually’ performing research within SL.

1.1 The Return of Mythic Spaces

La fantasia è un posto dove ci piove dentro. (Fantasy is a place where it rains)
(Perniola, < <http://www.marioperniola.it/site/dettagliotext.asp?idtexts=22>>)

Important guidelines for my research stem from the analysis of two crucial aspects, produced by a *triadic* dynamic between virtuality, art and technology. The study of these two aspects contributes to the understanding of the particular forms of virtual art that I am researching. First, one can speak about an ontological aspect: my work that focuses on art that has been planned, created (also *inspired* by) and distributed entirely in SL. Precision is needed, though: I will be using the term *Second Life-based art* (or the shorter SL-based art) to refer to a fragment of the spectrum of art-related issues and practices within this particular virtual world. In this sense, I will necessarily disregard some categories (and the imagery accompanying them) conventionally accepted as *art*, *electronic* and/or *non-virtual digital art*. I am interested in analysing anomalies or—to some extent—singularities (in aesthetic terms) represented by artists who utilise the set of tools for designing, building, representing in 3D and manipulating space, objects and avatars. Also of interest are those who use code and scripting tools, and the environmental features and conditions provided by Linden Lab’s SL interface. These operate and affect the sensorial, the subjective and the perceptual spheres in both worlds (AL and SL). So one is talking about art forms often based on script, or code-controlled physical motion, presence, appearance, identity, and character inside, outside, and in between the environment of both worlds. The case studies for this thesis focus on approaching a specific selection of the artists who use these as ‘raw matter’. Accordingly,

certain terms I use in this dissertation need to be clarified, a prominent one being what I refer to as *auto-empathy*. This is interpersonal interacting patterns that occur between avatars and their actual (real) users, as well as with other avatars, and is assumed as an idiosyncrasy of the virtual persona. That is to say, a process of behavioural, epistemic and aesthetic nature that, after all, begins with the formulation, acknowledgement, reinvention and acceptance of a ‘virtual self’ as an entity capable of emotionally and psychologically embodying his/her ‘author’ and ends with interaction, playing and aesthetic contribution in the form of collective experiences, subjective behaviour and reactions, and the advancement of aesthetic statements that only, or at least preferably, can be created **in** and **because** of SL’s particular environment.

Second, one could speak about a quasi hermeneutic aspect: for instance, when you look up places specifically devoted, tagged or named as ‘art’ or ‘artistic’ within the online “SL destination guide”⁵ in the virtual environment’s interface, around ninety to a hundred appear in the search window. Ranging from galleries, to virtual museums and experimental sites devoted to some kind of artistic production. This might not be that impressive for a population estimated, lately, at around fourteen million residents (by April 2009: <http://xdfusion.wordpress.com/2009/04/30/know-your-customers-second-life-demographics/>). Keep in mind, however, there are countless residents who participate, create and display other artwork and forms of interaction with the tools and materials provided by SL, who, classified by the nature of their content contribution would fall within the category of *electronic digital virtual art/artists*, the number grows significantly. It is worth noting that, in my thesis, I do not focus on digitalised forms of (more) conventionally defined ‘real’ objects of art (paintings, design, home decoration, graphics, sculptures, etc.) transplanted to the digital realm via scanner, digitalisation and up-loading, which can be exhibited, used and traded within SL. Yes, these are art forms, the validity of which is indeed not questioned here, but their scope and aesthetic nature falls outside the purposes of this investigation.

⁵ See <http://secondlife.com/destinations/>

What I am indeed interested in are art practices and manifestations of artistic spirit dealing with illusion, immersion, spatial/temporal intervention, performance, meaning making and code experimenting. I am also interested in critical and intellectual stances around the conditions of virtuality, avatar selfhood, identity, behaviour and *ethos* in SL. I am interested in residents whose avatars perform a parallel artist's identity and existence virtually, with the belief that having a 'second life' is worth it and all the more interesting when the enslaving obsession to mimic actual life ceases to be the (only) golden rule. I am interested in the kind of 'personality', behaviour and attitude that wholly justifies—creatively, intellectually, existentially and emotionally—projecting yourself into an avatar that comes to virtual life as 'you-there' in another self, a specific virtual 'personae' capable of endorsing paths for self-critical views, not just of SL or residence itself, but of virtuality at large.

Another important component of my thesis is the analysis of *liminal* forms of existence between virtual and actual worlds, which are enacted as (personal) narratives around the creation and development of a mythical character: that of one's designed avatar performing a role (displaying a personality) within the finite/infinite permutation of random—but subjective—goal-oriented activities in SL, what I have termed *personal plots*. This tendency, to a greater or lesser degree, is notorious in each of the artists in my case studies, and constitutes a central framing in the articulation of *distributed (digital) aesthetics*: 1. With the role of media and technology in the creative action of the virtual, what I call in this document the 'media studies perspective'; and 2. With the *ethos* regarding the interaction among avatars, actual players and the shared or collective production of aesthetic experiences, what I refer to as a *space of reciprocity*.

On this point, I return to Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*: in "Visibility" there is a short passage that explains, I estimate, the origins of my aesthetic/epistemic position toward SL-based art. In it, Calvino is paraphrasing Dantes' *Divine Comedy* (see the quote on this Chapter's head):

Where do they come from, these images that rain down into fantasy? Dante justifiably, had a high opinion of himself, to the point of having no scruples about proclaiming the direct divine inspiration of his visions. Writers closer to

us in time (with the exception of those few cases of prophetic vocation) establish their contacts through earthly transmitters, such as the individual or the collective unconscious; the time regained in the feelings that reemerges from time lost; or “epiphanies,” concentrations of being in a single spot or point of time. In short, it is a question of processes that, even if they do not originate in the heavens, certainly go beyond our intentions and our control, acquiring—with respect to the individual—a kind of transcendence. (87)

That being said, I would like to point to the surprising affective outcome of virtual residence in SL, an attitude or widespread condition acknowledged equally by conventional residents and famous artist-avatars such as Eva and Franco Mattes, Gazira Babeli, Bryn Oh and China Tracy.⁶ That is the sensation that the avatar develops his/her ‘own’ personality, and as a consequence what s/he does and accomplishes (or fails to) matters. Not only is this inspiring but it also fuels obsessive/compulsive psychological pathologies. So everyone embodied in his/her avatar(s), intentionally or not, is ‘performing’ within a certain personal *plot*. Living and embodying a narrative that pervades a great deal of what a virtual being does inside the environment. Indeed these aspects connect with a much larger conceptual landscape around the return of the mythical via the digital. In this regard, Beatrice Bittarello, an independent interdisciplinary researcher with a focus on the relationship between virtual worlds, art and literary history, has also acknowledged the existence of virtual worlds before the introduction of the Internet and computational technologies. Bittarello goes back to the history of visual art and literature as socio-cultural antecedents in which, even from a very long time ago, virtual spaces and worlds were created that frequently represented alternative spaces of religious or mythical scope. This takes on importance by locating the proto-religious dimension as a common element in historic, artistic and literary imagination. By locating current virtual worlds (at least among a certain kind of public reception) in the same mythical-religious tone, Bittarello centres the discussion around the important notion of *access* and *presence* in the virtual. With this position she carries out a re-conceptualisation of current virtual worlds with those of the past.

⁶ These are the avatar names of the artists selected for this research, all of them renowned and recognised in SL as well as AL. China Tracy was one of the first Second Life artists to show her SL artwork at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and Eva and Franco Mattes followed a few years later.

Bittarello conceptualises the aspect of creating myths and fantasies coupled with aesthetic proximity (as experience between access and exit via gateways) as a constant characteristic in the idea of the virtual. In general terms, it is the same idea already commented by Grau and Florian Cramer (as one will note below). Bittarello's perspective around the visual—explained as the use of imagination in the search and attainment of finding the *door* that accesses virtual worlds through techniques, devices (both mythical and real) and technologies—is of importance to my research in the dimensions of subjectivity, identity, design and exchange between AL and SL. In my view, Bittarello underscores something fundamental: that visual representation, the technique of moving images, the language of cinema and literary fiction principally, are the *motors of distinct technologies of vision* in the historical search for the sublime image, one that allows for immersion and 'access' to imaginary realms of mythological and religious dimensions. For her, the invention of cinema is a crucial development because it allows for the construction of a socially shared 'grammar' and a vocabulary with which one constructs imaginary representations of these worlds that have become fixed in social unconsciousness. It is my belief that the idea of a 'shared grammar' of cinematic nature seems to operate naturally between SL residents.

Cinema is in itself an alternative and parallel world, and in this sense a key point is the consideration that today SL residents experiment with, more or less, the integration between life online and off in the same manner that, historically, cinematograph identification worked in the audience. Consequently, the important idea is the possibility of an alternate or parallel plane of existence: the virtual is not necessarily an escape from the real, nor does it question or exclude it; rather, it complements it. As Doel & Clark affirm in Bittarello's article, "reality is the interplay of virtuality and actuality" (2008 14).

Cramer, in a similar view, although from a different point of access, talks about the return of a mythological space from the virtual, stressing *epistemology* and *techne* as two fundamental components of the phenomenon of the 'virtual', which are dimensions inherently centred on controlling and affecting 'matter' through the manipulation of symbols. In this sense Cramer equates the power of code-execution with what historically has been portrayed as *magic*. One of Cramer's main purposes in *Words Made Flesh*:

Code, Culture, Imagination is to demonstrate just how different hermeneutic and semantic processes—referred throughout history as *magic*—are updated and embedded in the phenomena of the virtual. For Cramer, that means the capacity of digital code, when executed, for transforming the embodiment or ‘materiality’ of messages and information through the intangible *lightness* of code programming:

The technical principle of magic, controlling matter through manipulation of symbols, is the technical principle of computer software as well. It isn’t surprising that magic lives on in software, at least nominally. References to magic abound in computer software branding ... A Google search on “magic” and “software” today yields more than fifteen million results. (15)

Several concepts coinciding and overlapping among Calvino’s, Bittarello’s, Cramer’s and, to some extent, Grau’s ideas are worth examining. For example, the common idea that virtual worlds are not inherently the product of technology, that technology dialogues constantly with, and in, human imagination and culture. This implies that they represent immaterial spaces in which it is possible to outline, design and structure social interactions between human beings represented by a virtual entity.

From another perspective, Nick Yee & Jeremy Bailenson’s work, for instance, focuses on specific behavioural and attitudinal fundamentals found in virtual worlds interaction. In their study of self-representation in virtual environments, Yee & Bailenson turn to the Greek God *Proteus* as the origin of the adjective ‘protean’, which means the “ability to make different self-representations” (271). Given the increasing number and hours dedicated to virtual environments in the world today, in which millions play with self-altered representations to such a degree that the threshold of “behavioural confirmation” can be overcome (272), the *Proteus effect* as they call it, can play an important role as a theoretical frame for analysing liminal behaviour, identity, appearance and hybrid forms of SL-based art through embodiment and manipulation of the representation (design) of avatars.

The *Proteus effect* refers to changes in actual (real) behaviour, reactions and attitudes derived from the agency, manipulation and embodiment of virtual self-representations. Yee & Bailenson have found that users display a more assertive or aggressive behaviour

in certain kinds of negotiations when, for example, a taller or more ‘impressive’ avatar is given to them. Notably, these affective and behavioural modifications revealed in conduct are extended, at least for some time, to the actual (real) world. Thus, executable code and embodiment, and avatar agency are threaded in a familiar pattern of modification, transformation and mutability of presence, and representation.

Yee & Bailenson call the avatar the “primary identity cue” in virtual worlds, as the effect her behaviour produces is of capital importance for people’s online behaviour (274). In other words, users of online environments pass through a process of ‘de-individuation’, in which their behaviour is adjusted to that of the avatar representing them. The identity, appearance and behaviour of this avatar adjusts, via *self-perception theory*, to the behaviour that others might expect from its appearance. In SL, for example, certain standards of self perception are emphasised because residents perceive (and relate to) their avatars from the perspectives allowed by SL interface design, particularly that of the third person, and although the first person modality also exists—mimicking the movement of the camera—it does it to a much lesser extent comparatively speaking. Yee & Bailenson, as well as David Velleman, have worked on the manipulation of the appearance and identity of avatars, and they think this is a two-way process that produces effects in both virtual and actual life. This opens important possibilities for SL applicability, from persons with disabilities—who can now have access to unedited experiences through a virtual ability—to a wide range of simulations using SL, to the more unsettling practices of control and influence on conduct through a virtual self.

From my perspective, the concepts outlined above may help to clarify some whys and hows about certain important themes I address in my thesis: virtual selfhood, identity, subjectivity and particularly virtual art in SL. What I seek to do, above all else, is to outline a suitable theoretical/methodological path that would contribute to broadening the understanding of virtuality from a multi perspective position around the virtual self. Particularly when one’s point of inflection is sustained in the articulation between subjectivity, cognition and visual expression, when aesthetics play the main role in the process of selfhood. Accordingly, the study of a particular group of avatars’ artists, and their appearance(s), actions and ‘narratives’ that transform them in ‘textual’ dimensions

of avatar-action (and the residents they represent in the real world) seems feasible under this view. Creating art in virtual worlds through imagination, subjectivity and control over technology needed to live truly aesthetic experiences seems to be opening and connecting the field of virtual worlds research to deeper and wider understandings of how psychological immersion and illusion, mediated by digital technologies, reshape virtual worlds at large—and with that, our own ideas with respect to the real containing the virtual that exists around a powerful ontology of the actual.

One purpose of my study is to understand how these worlds and their technologies influence virtual-self representation, identity processes, aesthetic experimentation and subjectivity, responses to which, in turn, display the faculty to access the actual world, the social and the production of online content with the achievements and risks of their added virtual aesthetic experience (which I understand as the auto-empathy factor or outcome). These aspects are threaded in a particular dynamic that looms on the horizon of future Web, just when the *merging* of the semantic networks, 3D virtual interactivity and social networking—today so often emphasised in current virtual world research—ceases to be a possibility and crosses over to reality.

1.2 Second Life: Not a Computer Game But a Social Environment

Linden Lab launched Second Life (SL) in 2003, and today the number of residents registered (players in SL) is around 14 million worldwide, with an average of 60,000 logged in at any given time.⁷ It is worth noting that residents might have more than one account, so concurrent users represent a fraction of accounts on the basis that one avatar

⁷ Data actualised to Dec 2012 shows a more or less constant average around 60,000 concurrent users, in 24 hours, 48 hours and 14 days. <http://dwellonit.taterunino.net/sl-statistical-charts/>. Another site displaying SL total use of hours (breakdown by top 20 countries, language, age and gender group) reads: “Linden Lab’s last publicly released monthly metrics which contained this information. While this information is a bit old, it appears relatively accurate.” Meta Linden’s Last Public Monthly Stats. 2008. (<http://xdfusion.wordpress.com/2009/04/30/know-your-customers-second-life-demographics/> accessed September 2012)

means one login and only one account. SL is not a conventional online computer game; it is more a social environment, an experiment, in which its members, known as residents, are provided the tools and basic knowledge to create content. Since the beginning, in SL, the understanding of identity playing and appearance of avatars, the way they create objects and spaces, and how they develop the capability to relate to others and create narratives is crucial. This dynamic, now four years old, weaves structure, actions, identity quests (and experimenting), social, economic, and emotional exchange, both in actual and virtual life among participants (Boellstorff 2008).

In this 'world', the development and maintenance of social bonds and the involvement of residents in the creation and reinvention of their virtual lives occurs through the mediation of 3D avatars that are digital representations of 'players' interacting in a virtual space. Unlike other virtual environments and computer games, SL virtual characterisations are primarily under the resident's control and creativity. It is precisely the capability of modifying and constantly reinventing an avatar's appearance and 'personality' that is hallmark of SL's ability for experimenting with identity and subjectivity. This implies, by extension, the displaying of visual, aesthetic and artistic experiences and objects, whose construction and trade grows in direct proportion to the experience of embodiment, social performance, and presence projected in the virtual person of the avatar.



**Figure 1: Lacan Galicia's Living Room
(Personal Screenshot from Second Life)**

An avatar's identity relies on a particular sense of 'selfhood' developed through digital manipulation, and filtered by an amplified and mutable subjectivity, a concept referred to by Adriano D'Aloia as *Auto-empathy*. In SL, the identity is negotiated and shaped through the exchange between avatars and people in both the 'actual' and the virtual worlds, to form a functional 'personality,' to the extent that it may have impact in actual reality (Velleman). Interacting with others catapults number of aspects to the surface, related to the way one represents herself on the screen: first to oneself, and then to others, a global set of attitudes, behaviours, emotions and skills that fall under the field of impression management (Goffman). With all of these aspects at play, a dense dynamic involving in the exchange of symbols, meaning, expressions and behaviour, emerges from the interaction in the virtual environment. Accordingly, in this thesis, a focal ontology of SL's discourse deals with presence and identity under conditions of mutability or transference between worlds, granted that in virtual worlds, representation, subjectivity, embodiment and agency all lie in a *liminal* state, that is to say, in transit from selfness, identity and intra-subjective *aesthesia*, to interaction, sociability, meaning-making and inter-subjectivity.

These aspects become amplified because their representation and the social interaction they contribute to threading, are heavily manifested across media because the environment in which avatars ‘live’ is interpenetrated by powerful digital communicative tools that, ultimately, contribute to (re)shaping presence, interaction and identity within SL. Of course I am not suggesting that just because an arsenal of hypermedia tools is at hand for communicating within the virtual world and outside with the actual world, that bigger or better communicational patterns necessarily produced. I certainly think that, due to *liminality*, communication becomes an aesthetic component ready for experimentation, a pattern playing a role in the overall quest of being immersed and acting as another ‘self’.

In that sense the relevant aspect is that, in fact, the potential to communicate through digital hyper media contributes to the sense and the shaping of the ‘self’ in virtual environments because it favours and enhances practices of psychological/affective agency and transference through affective embodiment of personalities and narratives for both the avatar and the actual person, right in the transitional state of *liminality*. Dwelling in world and out may or may not be interesting depending on the feasibility of creating and using psychological/affective temporal markers such as ‘today’, ‘last month’, ‘next week’. Under these conditions, planning and performing your virtual existence as another self becomes effectively and affectively stimulated by the persistence of a virtual world like SL. Interactivity, persistence, hyper communication and the capacity to share with others in a common virtual space while *AL personae* may be located in opposite ends of the earth contributes to the feeling of ‘oneself’ being immersed in a three dimensional space.

1.3 Immersion, Image and Interaction

It might be a bit surprising that, despite the relatively low resolution or ‘draft’ representation of spaces and the ‘bulky’ geometry of avatars and objects in SL, the sensation of being immersed is nevertheless powerful, psychologically enticing, and semiotically meaningful. Edward Castronova has explained this phenomenon as a powerful “suspension of disbelief” (292). This implies that the threshold of awareness or ‘subconsciousness’ while playing in virtual worlds can be, somehow, gauged or regulated

to the extent that a defining line among them may become blurred. This is a common experience among computer and video gamers, the borderline sensation that ‘we’ are in fact not ‘physically’ present (contained) inside the virtual ‘world’ becomes fuzzy. Although it sounds logical that better resolution display capacity and more realistic representation of things and beings would result in deeper and better immersion in virtual worlds, the actual ‘feeling’ (of immersion) is definitively more dependent on affective and psychological factors than in—say—cutting-edge rendering technology. Neither expensive and sophisticated sensorial gear, nor higher levels of naturalistic iconographic resemblance are, so to speak, a *sine qua non* condition for a vivid feeling of immersion. This aspect is of importance because, ultimately, it represents two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, the many contradictory referents in terms of aesthetics come from a tendency—frequently manifested in computer science and engineering spheres and their obsession with *Pythagorean aesthetics*—towards a vision of trimmed, polished forms of beautiful mathematical and geometrical ‘purity’. A ‘taste’ that, to some extent, is present by default in the (corporative) *ethos* of SL. On the other hand, one can nevertheless consider this as ‘one more’ possible aesthetic ‘flavour’ among many, avoiding to situate it, uncritically, as the highest ranking just because of a biased aesthetic judgement says that it might be ‘intrinsically superior’ due to pretensions of superior visual, formal, geometric and mathematical *purity*.

The analysis of issues like these revealed to me important considerations for my research, hence I have highlighted different perspectives on digital and virtual aesthetics, like those from Cramer, Grau, Boris Groys, and Anna Munster. The idea is to get a sense of contemporary schools of thought around the electronic interactive art as a specific kind, within the domains of which, SL-based art can be located. In any case, there should be no doubt that, no matter how logical it seems that there might be a linear correspondence between high-end digital technology and high realism or naturalistic resemblance to the actual world, the simple truth is that this is not a mandatory requirement for providing a fully absorbent, rewarding and enticing immersion in virtual worlds. This point has merit in light of the relative scarcity of research around it. For instance, Castronova has not directly related that factor to the history of its perceptual dimension in the antecedents of virtual computer games, nor does he explicitly refer to historical-cultural factors of

immersion, image, cinema or literature that other authors mention as antecedents to virtual worlds. For the theoretical framing and (media studies) perspective I am applying in this thesis, these factors and more, including perspectives from which to look at them, are of first importance. For, as Grau emphasises, virtual art was not born with computer or digital devices, so there is no actual overcoming or substitution from contemporary virtual art in relation to other traditional forms of art—digital or otherwise—that share the illusion of immersion as key to their aesthetic stance. Rather one should, says Grau, based on art history, learn to decipher and assess the concepts of contemporary virtual art. In this regard he points to Friedrich Kittler's perspective as quoted in Grau:

In a historical context, this new [media] art form can be relativized, adequately described, and critiqued in terms of its phenomenology, aesthetics, and origination. In many ways, this method changes our perception of the old and helps us to understand history afresh. Thus older media, such as frescoes, paintings, panoramas, film, and the art they convey, do not appear passé; rather, they are newly defined, categorized, and interpreted. Understood in this way, new media do not render old ones obsolete, but rather assign them places within the system. (Grau 8)

For me, some resonances of Calvino's 'method' in *Six Memos* incorporating 'older' artistic procedures in a literary discourse for the future, are present in Grau's notion of "assign[ing] them places within the system". A bit surprisingly, however, is how an inclusive perspective like this is avoided or overseen by other virtual studies research. For instance, it seems to me that Castronova would like to see the word 'synthetic' replace 'virtual' wherever it appears, neglecting or, worse, compressing the inherent epistemological vantages of a perspective grounded in the idea of an inclusive *continuum* in critical historical terms, when, in fact, a few principal ideas in his book *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Cultures of Online Games* would not be in line with those very antecedents. This is clear in the definitive importance he concedes to "game culture". Castronova's reflection on virtual games as culture has contributed to an important perspective merging science, communications and technology, with geeks, hackers and online game business, against the background of virtual worlds and virtual selves as representative of synthetic worlds. An interesting fact worth mentioning is that Castronova, originally from economics, came to virtual reality via the (analytical) field of video games and role-playing. He states that: "it has to be said that it was gamers, and not

research scientists, who first made the critical discoveries that led to mass immersion in VR spaces” (291). The change of paradigm in research on VR from an emphasis on “sensory-input hardware” (286)—seeking to translate the sensorial to input-data—to software and platforms of online collaboration shifted the main topic of research to the power of sensorial-psychological immersion.

1.3.1 Suspension of Disbelief and A Sense of Community

What gamers brought to the subject of immersion, according to Castronova, is that their perspective is centred on subjectivity, well-being and “enhanced suspension of disbelief” (289); without these, immersion would not be possible. In this sense Castronova points to Pierre Levy’s idea that “the virtual is a kind of real becoming” (287), a core idea presented as well in Munster’s aesthetic theory, that harks back to Gilles Deleuze’s concepts of [*logic of*] *differentials*, *the fold* and indeed *becoming*. One may say that Munster’s idea of becoming is crafted from her interest in and affinity for the *baroque*: for her, “the digital is part of a baroque event” conceived so that a “baroque flow now unfolds genealogically out of the articulation of the *differential* relations between embodiment and technics” (2006 5). For Munster, this is an *event* responsible for generating *logics of differential* that produce a dynamic ‘force-field’ of aesthetic pulses (against each other). In this field of forces she thinks that:

the binary pairs that have populated our understanding of digital culture and new media technologies—*physicality and virtuality*, *analog and discreet states*, *real and hyperreal*—can be seen to impinge upon each other rather than be mutually exclusive. The effect of these areas’ convergence and divergence is to produce ever-new and consistently mutating outcomes. (2006 5)

In this sense I refer to *flickering meaning* and *mutable identity* as a particular ‘outcome’ revealing the sway effects of digital aesthesia. Regarding the idea of *the fold*, it is interesting to observe that Deleuze also turned to the baroque, analysing the work of Gottfried Leibniz to grasp the notion and process of *the fold* as simultaneously *form* and *process*. From this, I envision an articulation between embodiment, techniques for self-

representing, and technologies responsible for producing *blocs* of sensation⁸ as a shift from spatial to temporal regimes at the hands of every resident in SL that lives as a simultaneous processing within a collective experiencing of aesthesia. In the next section of this Chapter, I will return to Munster's *distributed aesthetics*, but for the moment I will recapitulate the conceptual lay-out traced thus far around virtual aesthetics as a set of experiences emphasising a sense of community through immersion, illusion, suspension of disbelief, becoming, differentials and *the fold*. These conform the polyphonic axiology around which an approach to virtual world aesthetics is feasible and imaginable.

Users are deeply interested in experiencing virtual worlds and selves collectively: the presence of a community helps to create a truer sense of reality in a context where one can experiment with subjectivity, but also compete (for attention) and have fun, and above all else, where one can sustain a cognitive, lucid and aesthetic melding (Castronova 292). To me, Second Life is a good example of this widened and evolving reflection on virtual environments in connection with the real world, as immaterial as it is excessively charged with data and information. Virtual worlds behavioural research like that of Fox, Bailenson & Binney, and Duchenaut, Wen, Yee and Wadley, among others, enters into play here. These researches have stated clearly that *emotional* and *affective* components are tightly involved in the feeling of presence in virtual environments. The first set of researchers (Fox, Bailenson & Binney) have studied the extent to which synchronous reactions, behavioural and psychological responses are elicited by virtual world's user interaction. The latter have conducted research around SL demography and the hybrid paths to follow for an understanding of identity and personality-shaping issues in 'actual' life, derived from virtual 'avatarian' existence. Hence, since there is no specific plot, goal, score or rules to follow in SL, portraying it as a 'game' would be misleading. SL is indeed a social environment or experiment occurring in virtual worlds. Nevertheless, in this thesis, I intend to demonstrate how the meaningful achievements in the social, economic, cultural and personal planes in SL, are symptomatically 'goal

⁸This is Deleuze and Guattari's description of the grouping of sensations into affectual moments that occur in aesthetic experience. See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, translator H. Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), in Munster 2006 173-174.

oriented' activities, and these are dependent, largely, on one's personal and collective narratives, or, to borrow a term from Paul Ricoeur, *emplotment*: "the development of a kind of story line or assignation of roles between a character—a subject—and a narrative in which the order of submission between one and another can oscillate" (Ricoeur 20).

The use of the term is not gratuitous, since a substantial part of the enticing and meaningful situations that avatars in SL may be involved in, through interaction, are ultimately goal-oriented narratives. Ricoeur's main thesis in *Oneself as Another* sustains this point: he affirms that the correlation of commitment and thought—the 'attestation' of the being of selfhood—is where attestation comes to mean:

a kind of belief ... attestation belongs to the grammar of 'I believe-in.' ... The kinship between attestation and testimony is verified here: there is no 'true' testimony without 'false' testimony. ... [*C*]redence is also trust. This will be one of the leitmotifs of our analysis: attestation is fundamentally attestation of self. (21-22)

What is notable here is the idea of credence as trust. In SL, I think, the 'feelings' apprehended in the process of attesting become propelled and sustained by:

1. the persistent nature of the three-dimensional space (which elicits the acknowledgement of a temporal continuum, i.e. avatars building a sense of a past and present time, despite operating in a virtual, artificial space);
2. the hyper-communication tools available for residents; the transforming and enhancement of presence; and
3. the issue of *inverse presence*, a phenomenon that has gained attention from researchers lately, and one that, within the confines of my research, I would describe as a teleological counterbalance to Castronova's *enhanced suspension of disbelief*.

Briefly, *inverse presence* is the recursive illusion that virtual game players and SL residents, at some point, have the sensation of being immersed in 'non-mediated' experiences, when of course they are; and the inverse sensation is also true. In other words, the 'cultured' utterance that virtual experiences are real to the extent they can

trigger the reverse illusion: the sensation that some experiences of the actual (real) feel like being mediated when they are not:

If (tele)presence is the illusion of nonmediation, then inverse presence is the illusion of mediation. Two interrelated types of illusion of mediation can be identified, one involving the form of experience and the other its content. When an individual says something such as, “it looked like a postcard” or “it felt like a movie,” they are reporting similarities in the form of nonmediated and mediated experiences, and confusion between the two. When they suggest that the unfolding of events was “like a movie” (i.e., scripted or artificial) they are pointing to similarities in (and confusion about) the content of nonmediated and mediated experiences. Ultimately, when people experience presence they think (at some level) that the mediated world is “real,” while when they experience inverse presence, they think (at some level) that reality is mediated. (Reeves Timmins & Lombard 496)

Among several paradoxical conditions of virtual existence, this one reflects the extent to which avatars inhabiting, producing content and socialising in SL contribute to multiplying and making *opaque* single versions about the purpose of having a second life and what its goals are. In Linden Lab’s own words, the main objective of SL is the creation and maintenance of social relations, the edification of a virtual society and the objects, spaces and narratives necessary to populate it: a collection of cultures designed and shaped at residents’ will (Rymaszewski et. al.).

1.4 A Media Studies Perspective?

I point to a different perspective in this thesis, one whose paths to empathy and self-representation are assumed as forms of narrative-to-self-experience, they are extending subjectivity to form a ceiling (metaphorically speaking) to which a test of the limits of virtually-represented personae can be measured. From this simple yet decisive theoretical perspective, I posit that *auto-empathy* necessarily comes before social bonding, conventional sympathy and socialisation with other avatars (D’Aloia). This points to the emergence of the affective outcome I have already mentioned, which is projected to our selves when experiencing selfhood in ‘avatarian’ mode, becoming along this path a valid category for the understanding of virtual worlds at large. In rigour, one is talking about true aesthetic experiences centred on self-representation and self-assumption of an extended (yet temporal) subjectivity. This harks back to the Deleuzian issue of “what

constitutes a digital machine” in relation to “what bodies have and what they might become” (Munster 2006 9).

That trend constitutes a more enticing, decisive, and appealing purpose in SL than the creation of social bonds and material (yet virtual) culture. In this regard, my research relies on the intellectual presumption (and the subjective belief) that certain kinds of SL artwork and digital aesthetics practices (i.e. avatars playing the role of artists) are a preferred scenario to approach questions around avatar identity, behaviour and ‘personality’ from perspectives of both aesthetics and media studies. In the following pages, other topics exploring avatars and their relation with distributed aesthetics, distributed cognition, and the conspicuous sociability built from the individual awareness of virtual avatar’s doubled selfhood, are developed.

Approaching presence and meaning-making play as forces enhancing our actual self is a valid framework. Furthermore, a media studies perspective on issues of interactive virtual art, such as the one studied in this paper, means, above all, the commitment to paying close attention to the diffuse (Campanelli), distributive (Munster) and epistemic potential (Manovich) of data flows operating in the liminal border of AL/SL collective interaction. In the concluding remarks of this Chapter, I will touch on how these subjects may contribute to the research and discussion of new epistemologies and forms of understanding digital virtual existence, proposing some primary descriptions of how these subjects seem to appear (at least to me) in each of the artist’s Case Studies, which will be treated in a full chapter for each of them.

1.4.1 A Distributed Aesthetics Perspective

In *Materializing New Media*, Munster cites a definition of the virtual by N. Katherine Hayles that I consider to be central for the development of aesthetic thought in digital and virtual worlds: “Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns” (Hayles 1999 27). To me, this definition highlights four domains fundamental to understanding the concepts of distributed aesthetics and distributed cognition, from which I have intended to sketch a method for the analysis of selected SL-based art. These domains are: virtuality, culture, perception

and information. It is worth noting the grammatical element chosen by Hayles to connect the parts of the phrase to make sense: the qualitative adjective *interpenetrated*. The term works as a suitable metaphor, a 'visualisation aid', if you will, for the complex subject of answering questions like what is virtual? How do the actual world and the virtual relate, or resist, each other? How do they function together? On one hand it implies the merging of different media historically separated, and, on the other, the systematic 'reduction' of information to one *unitary* system, that of the zeros and ones of the binary format.

This hermeneutic operation equals, in some way, the syntactic transformation of the digital file in a multiplicity of configurations, which often goes dimmed or unexplored in digital discourses around art. However, it seems pertinent at this point to take hold of what Groys calls one of the essential features of digital imaging: the fact that, due to a lack of stability in the 'material' order, there corresponds an increment in the potential of digital data to generate and multiply meaning and transitory or ephemeral (yet powerful) formal configurations (Groys 87-89). This can be observed in the virtual environment of SL where, it is worth noting, residents are able to design, build and exchange 3D objects and 'real' places under particular aesthetic activities always filtered by specific sequences and requirements in the shaping and manipulating of binary strings of data, always in pursuit of the representation of personal narratives that coalesce in the context of an augmented subjectivity by virtue of the relationship avatar-actual resident. For example, SL is a special place where gravity, roads, cars and other vehicles do exist, but people can fly, and even dis-assemble and re-assemble when teletransport themselves to another location. Despite this, *teletransportation*, which is indeed only a metaphor, is the preferred and most used means to mobility. SL is a place where houses and buildings have roofs they don't actually need (neither rain, snow or sun have actual impact) and seasonal changes are only represented by visual metaphors (very powerful indeed); where people need (and like) to gather to *fundamentally* perform (theatrically) their sense of individuality and subjectivity to others. In this regard, as I am myself a resident of SL, I think every variable involved in paths of socialisation can be directly perceived, put into sets to analyse, and 'produced' from a direct qualitative immersion in the 'game' (Boellstorff 2008; Mason; Bittarello).

Munster also addresses the idea of ‘immersion in the game’, but from the specific contours of a philosophical approach to the issues of simultaneity and representation (borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari). Accordingly, the production of data ‘from within’ may lead to the analysis of dynamics occurring simultaneously as *form as process* (Deleuze & Parnet 61) involving the design, creation and mutability of identity, in spatial, temporal and transformative digital regimes. Thus, I have paid particular attention to Munster’s framing regarding the question of the mind-body *problem* from the perspective of digital culture.

The subject has been traditionally traced to Descartes and the ontological question of how the immaterial mind—or soul—can influence the material body. How, and to what extent the interaction between the two is not partaking the character of both? From a widespread historical perspective, modernity often presented philosophers and scientists proposing schemes, ideas and diagrams in search of locating specific parts of the brain. A while ago, some neuroscientists and philosophers would have considered them virtually *interactionist* models. I have also inquired about Information Philosophy⁹ looking for a broader landscape upon which to situate my understanding of certain ideas from Munster, Paul Fishwick, Cassirer, Langer, Ricoeur, Deleuze, etc. The question seemed relevant to me because a significant portion of the research in the field (IP) sees (and represents) the mind as an information processing system that would operate on both macro and micro levels: at the macro, the mind/brain is adequately determined to make its decisions and resulting actions in ways that are causally connected to the agent's character and values. Though there is not necessarily a binary split between them, this is the level in which the pair mind/brain is (represents) everything that determinist and—so to speak—*compatibilist* philosophers would expect it to be.

I have tried, in extremely simplified strokes and on a smaller scale to analogically illustrate this in the first lines of this Chapter via Calvino’s ideas. To me, this would represent an epistemological paradigm underpinning Munster’s aesthetic theory: Munster

⁹ Defined as the area of research of conceptual issues at the intersection of computer science, information technology, and philosophy. (Wikipedia accessed April 26, 2009)

traces a connection to Leibniz and other phenomenological thought (Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl), which is applied and reconnected to the model of an information aesthetics theory. To them, particular arguments are incorporated from Deleuze and Guattari: selfhood, identity, time and space, the fold, blocs of sensation, etc. Then, an information aesthetics theory like this becomes a major articulation or a plane of inflection between the digital image as a *form*, as a *process* (and the reverse), virtual existence, and interactive presence/subjectivity, in which I intend to situate several orders of dialogue between significance and paths to digital image construction; semiotic and semantic layers of meaning-making and the techniques and technologies needed; cognitive orders and game-oriented culture trends into the construction and managing of virtual identities, selfhood and dimensions of subjectivity among SL-based selected artists on my thesis.

Munster defines *digital aesthesia* as a set of dynamic negotiating processes, analysing and critiquing new media art works (being herself a new media artist), and she assumes this dynamic as if embedded in the current shifting from spatial to temporalised *regimes* of forms. This is, according to her, inherently related to the flow of digital information in which the 'shift' is at the center of a distinct aesthetic theory, one opposing more conventional views, traditionally based on ideas of disembodiment, disappearance and the digitisation of the self as the 'inevitable' outcome of the forces of the digital, acting on the domains of art and creativity in dialogue with technology. This position is assumed by Munster in an interview from 2001, "Digitality: Approximate Aesthetics":

Where and how to locate a digital aesthetic? In a sense the question, although unanswerable and reaching us from a recent but already faded past (circa 1993), is no longer of any value for theorists and practitioners of "new media" and "digital" arts... [D]espite the fact that the notion of digitality to promote, describe or identify a still emerging aesthetic seems already jaded, I want to argue that there is nevertheless something specific about digital art. This specificity is in part a result of the mode of producing, consuming and participating with those machines that are the condition of possibility for digital art practice. These machines are not reducible to a set of technical parameters nor can the digital be considered solely in terms of the formal qualities and conditions it imposes on its products or outcomes. This is not then, an argument from the medium, particularly if the medium is to be considered as the technology that is used for the realisation of digital artwork. I want to argue, alongside writers such as Whitelaw, that the content and ideas expressed through digital art should be addressed over and above the technology that supports them. But at the same time I want to suggest

that there is increasingly a sense in which it is possible to aesthetically locate the digital. This discussion of a digital aesthetics and of a variety of digital art genres that constitute a diverging field is framed through my exploration of proximity as a structuring concern in developing a notion of a digital aesthetics. The grounds of debate shift away from concerns such as virtuality, interactivity and dematerialisation often cited as the preoccupations of digital art. (Munster 2001 1)

In a different interview Munster affirms that for her, “digital aesthetics is about modes of perception and sensation and how these are made possible by, and develop in response to, certain social and technical arrangements” (Lovink 2). From that perspective the discussion of the *insolvent position of the body* (and therefore identity) comes to the centre of the relation between information, aesthetics, computers and representation. The long-term discussions around binary oppositions such as *mind/body*, *classical rationalism/visual perspectivalism* (as being the genesis of the digital culture) (Munster 2006 3) are systematically and critically examined. The genealogy of digital culture, the place of information aesthetics and the analysis of the debate for and against disembodiment in new media aesthetics are some of Munster’s main themes for my dissertation.

For my subject in SL, one salient element found in Munster’s framing concerns the critical analysis of the technical and epistemological premises that links this (relatively new) technology with current western culture in which, historically, the mind and the eye have been privileged over the body. As I understand it, the representation of the self through avatar appearance and virtual bodies’ agency poses the issue of avoiding, as long as is reasonable and feasible, the split in analytical binarisms such as real/virtual, mind/body, actual/deferred, etc. I profoundly identify with Munster’s thought in this regard, grounded in Deleuze and Guattari’s thought. Concepts such as *differential*, *blocs* (of sensation, time, fixation), *the fold* and others already mentioned, emphasise a basic ontology: the body occupies an insolvent place in connection to its digital version, and distributed aesthetics and new media technologies may demonstrate that the split between the virtual and the actual exists only as an illusion of abstract intellectual construction.

The final element from Munster concerning my research in SL is the concept of *distributed aesthetics*. In Chapter V of *Materializing New Media*, she is approaching the analysis of the “possibilities implicit in digital production of virtual duration”:

I suggested that virtual reality and computer gaming offer experiences of non-linear temporalities where time is compressed, layered and multimodal rather than disappearing or monotonously stretched into eternal presents. I want to turn to this conception of digital temporality again in order to trace the final vector I suggest is unfolding for global information aesthetics, a vector that perhaps signals its most radical shift. In all modes of digital media production we are witnessing the move from regimes of spatialization to those of temporalization. (171-72)

To put it into context, I will summarise Munster’s theory within the confines of my writing here. Distributed Aesthetics can be assumed as a the resulting process of three intersecting areas:

1. *The incessant reconfiguration of the relation between body, materiality and computational technology*. Munster writes that the body is insoluble in the face of the continuous process of reconfiguration that results from aesthetics, technology, information, virtual reality and digital representation (171-72). This, to me, suggests the concept of a fluid virtual self (an extension of our real one) that one can ‘embody’ extending sensorial reality of the body and conventional space, creating an expansion of subjectivity favoured, I think, for the spatialisation of information pointed to by Michael Benedikt. The subjective becomes ‘public and social’ at least in virtual form, and thus accesses visibility and cognitive productivity, in the paradoxical format of the individually social, as social networking well knows.

2. *Perception and sensation are continual modes of current aesthetic experimentation*, themselves permutable, because they are the result and response to techno-social arrangements of the contemporary world. Munster understands the global group of new media as a “composition of relative speeds mediated by links or relations to other and older media” (Lovink 2). This aspect is important for a critical analysis of design in virtual media because it requires introducing the perspective of media studies into the CSCW (computer supported collective work) design, that is not just from the inherent

communicational nature of the technologies involved, but in the fact that the distributive character of the digital produces a direct impact in the reconfiguration of our epistemologies of the virtual.

3. *Self-composition processes.* Munster affirms that a theoretical-analytical perspective from media studies is indispensable for an informed (current) digital aesthetics view, but she means not the traditional one centred on communication; rather, one in which it can be shown how new media not only changes other forms of former media, but also changes and reorganises our taxonomies and epistemologies on media. Digital media does not only translate other media, it also redistributes them (Manovich 1998). For this reason she claims that virtual art (and worlds) have the potential for a true ‘space of reciprocity’ the same that, she claims, is absent in mass media.

1.4.2 A Space of Reciprocity

From my perspective Munster alludes to the process of two elements working together by merging the two in a reversible loop: unstable meaning and binary format. Together they conform the actual condition (and the configurative quality) of the perception of contemporary world through the digital that, as a result of technology, globalisation and information, has acquired a ‘visible’ yet fictive representational dimension in culture, and also a pervasive yet mutable ‘invisible’ identity as a quotidian element in our experience of the ‘real’ from an expanded version that includes the virtual. In other words a culturalised, functional *locus*, in our personal and collective imaginary, creates and influences our social ‘actual’ experience with the virtual. In this manner, the ‘real’ includes the virtual and the idea of the virtual, because that idea includes necessarily the idea of the real. The latter then reveals itself as a process of mutable (flickering) ‘excess’ of meaning.¹⁰ Indeed it is difficult to picture reality today without, in one way or another, invading and/or invoking the incessant flowing of digital data streams and the

¹⁰ The term might sound misleading or rare, but it actually constitutes a semiotically grounded (and necessary) entry point or *locus* of access for my analysis of Second Life-based art in the next chapters. Specifically, in the outlining and application of Groys’, Grau’s and Munster’s aesthetic ideas on the digital, the interactive and the virtual.

technologies, codes, images and signifiers that give it full perceptive and practical functionality as part of the real.

Humans live in a time and space interpenetrated and densely charged with information that might adopt ‘temporal’ states of intelligibility shaping, in this way, cultural referents, modifying and extending our perception, emphasising the instability and mutability of meaning and transforming information in a multiplicity of configurative variants: images, representations, sensorial stimulation, sound, 3D environmental variations in form of data, news and information instantly at hand through ubiquitous computing and *smart* personal communication devices. In all of them the *interpenetrability* and *interpretability* of the world has grown immeasurably, a condition reasonably called ‘super complexity’. In the terms of the particular perspectives of the selected SL-based artists in this thesis—Eva and Franco Mattes, Gazira Babeli, Bryn Oh and China Tracy, each of them creating artistically within super complexity—have proven that the reversible is also true: the virtual includes the ‘real’, because the latter includes the idea of the former.

Reflections from different perspectives on this phenomenon contribute to the purpose of my research. For instance, Castronova thinks that ‘contrasting’ the different anthologies produced by the early ‘visionaries’ of virtual worlds, with the current analysts of Synthetic Worlds, and conceding one is capable of knowing the distinction, will allow for diagnosing, analysing and making future decisions on a better qualitative ground. Indeed, he claims that Synthetic Worlds are part (now) of the super complex real, or ‘actual’ world:

The two worlds, inner and outer, already seem to be affecting one another more than we might have imagined, especially on cultural and emotional level. ... our best guess of the near-term future involves a wide variety of fairly sophisticated fantasy worlds, with a large and growing number of people in them. Those people will generally jump into and out of worlds with ease, generally becoming less and less conscious of the distinction of what is “real” and what is “not real.” ... those who have thought deeply about this say that such a line has never existed as a matter of objective fact. Rather, the line between play and not-play is a social construct, something we decide collectively to impose or not. ... the emergence of this technology ... makes it very difficult to draw a clear line between the synthetic world and the outer world. (Castronova 268-70)

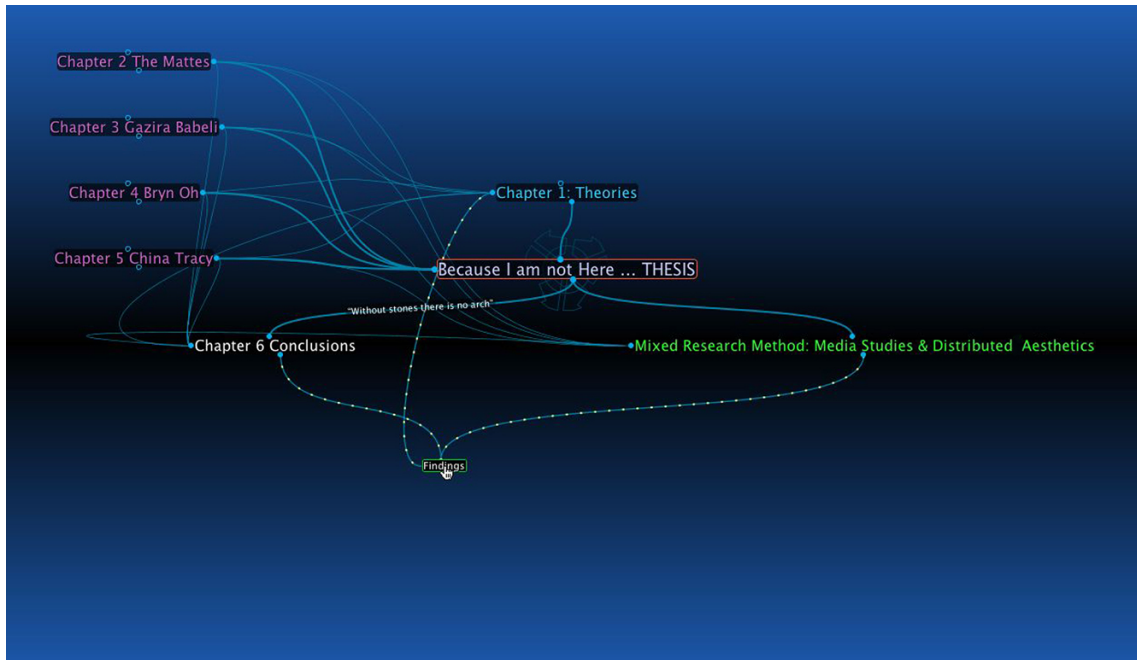
I think this view is a suitable illustration of Hayles' definition previously mentioned. Due to *interpenetrability* and *super complexity* (Hayles 27) , an unambiguous boundary between the actual and the virtual is no longer 'visible' (if one concedes this use to be the case in pre-virtual-interactive times, which is, to some extent, debatable). However, if one proceeds differently, from another less literal interpretation to a more metaphorical one (which would be, itself, a kind of interpenetration from a semiotic point of view), various key questions arise: Where is the self located in all of this? Who perceives from within the virtual environment? What spaces and objects is one talking about? Where is that which is perceived located, as well as he or she who perceives? What tools are required to negotiate with the objects that are penetrated by information patterns? The list goes on. The contemporary world, the "world as information" (Manovich Software), is a realm in which things and people, both real and virtual, interpenetrate one another, to communicate, signify and obtain information, data and sensorial stimulants from all domains; to such an extent that an indication of this dynamic is the fact that the very visualisation of data is becoming visible (Manovich Cultural Analytics).¹¹

In my theoretical framing I have taken into consideration certain factors intervening in the highly charged experiences of cognitive processing and aesthetic experimentation. These are related to the expression of subjectivity that is reinforced via virtual worlds media. The use *in world* of this media enables residents of SL to produce content, knowledge and culture in a virtual social environment while simultaneously allowing them (empowering them?) to experiment with their own identity through a group of artefacts, tools and other potent channels of communication at hand. As such, the design of an avatar's appearance and how this affects its identity ends up being revealed in that it has more influence on the reconfiguration of the expression of selfhood than it initially appears. The behaviour, self-esteem and even the more or less mythologised narratives created around an avatar's personality embodying it, modify the attitude and the idea of oneself. It is precisely in this terrain in which the four artists selected for the case studies excel.

¹¹ See SoftWhere 08 (#03) by Lev Manovich at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=husyjVEwt6M> (accessed October 17 2008)

More than evaluating or critiquing the design of cognitive tools inside SL, or elaborating a typology of ‘styles’ and image design of avatars, what interests me is the analysis of the distributive nature of cognition in its narrow relation (I believe) to information aesthetics, particularly how this process contributes, paradoxically, to making the subject of oneself as another (virtual) self, a more exposed one to the collective or public interaction process, precisely from the enhancement of the personal: subjectivity and individuality. To me, this process, described here in wide strokes, is what constitutes the *space of reciprocity* alluded to by Munster.

In this regard, I centre on a group of specific users in SL, as previously mentioned, who share their time and subjectivity in the decisions, modalities and motivations for dotting on the desired appearance of their avatars, plus the disquieting fact that, according to Velleman, even though residents can create multiple virtual bodies and invent fantastic histories for them in VWs, they continue to (cor)respond to a ‘real mind’. All of this can be feasible for a study of the interaction between real minds and subjectivities giving expression to virtual art through mutable identities in SL. This is, to reiterate, a dynamic known as a *space of reciprocity* that, according to Munster, characterises virtual world aesthetic exchange, but is rather absent from mass media. Thus the sheer and rapid importance gained in the last years by virtual worlds research around the distributive character of its interactions, along with the exchange and extension of intra-to-inter-subjectivity—as is the case of SL—might explain the need for a Media Studies Perspective.



**Figure 2: Flux Diagram for Thesis Chapters
(Personal Screenshot from Personal Brain Application)**

1.4.3 Media Studies and the Essential Dichotomy Between Vision and Image

The issue of visibility, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, is subjacent in Munster’s theory, and is also present in Bittarello, Cramer, and—although in a different intellectual pursuit—Grau. My aim in studying these contributions is to bring them into dialogue within the boundaries of the analytical perspective applied to my case studies. This is represented schematically in the image above, in which one can appreciate a minimum of three types of connection between the case study chapters and the theoretical frame, mediated by the research method. Briefly:

1. Chapter 1 paints a theoretical landscape upon which to locate the aesthetic vector that each case study provides;
2. Each case study (Chapters 2 through 5) provides elements for the (re)adjustment of both qualitative inquiry actions and the reorientation and delimitation of the theoretical framework (that explains the function of the analogies deployed in the case studies); and

3. In the conclusion (Chapter 6), a conversation among differentials (the case studies and the theories) will provide the opportunity to examine outcomes as organized around the research questions.

On a parallel sense, I will also weave in ideas from Peter Weibel who has written an extraordinary essay on the historic path followed by western visual art. Weibel's text covers a short but decisive span of time, from the invention of photography, the Optic Revolution of late nineteenth century, cinematograph, and the emergence of the artistic vanguards of the early twentieth century, to the rise of film language, and the self-analytical (and rhetorical) shift of early art movements in the 1930s that would have elevated—affirms Weibel—the visibility of 'vision' (that is, artistic visualisation) to the status of epochal 'style', psychoanalytic (art) object and virtual extension of consciousness:

[they, the artists] taught us to see differently with the aid of machines, revealing a world of images that could not be created and displayed without them. They created a writing of 'vision', the *opseography*, instead of a writing of movement (film), they observed vision, developing the techniques to 'see' vision, the *opseoscopy*". (Weibel 112, my translation)

What is different in today's conception of virtual world (and art) is that computational, digital and information technologies are integrated in obtaining an interactive immersion with the production of an image: a three-dimensional representation on a display or visual device through which one interacts with other individuals connected online.

Paradoxically the evolving path pointed to by Weibel in the interpenetration of visual arts and digital technology has contributed to the enhancement of the belief in the 'appropriation' of vision mainly as a subjective experience, and therefore as an aesthetic experience 'in' and 'out' of the boundaries of art, in the middle of a collective experimentation.

In other words, digital technology today provides a concrete way of arriving at, acting within, and manipulating the traditional search for an illusory space populated by immersive images (the historical domain of artists) (Grau). The ultimate features of Virtual Worlds are, then: interactivity, persistence and co-presence with dozens of

thousands or millions of individuals at a time. The focus of these ideas, although specifically delimited to certain aesthetic practices and artists in SL, methodologically and intellectually maintains, as a priority, the fact that the ‘singular’ within the collective-interactive virtual worlds aesthetic experience develops a quick capacity for blurring the conventional boundaries between the collective (public) avatar identity-personality, and the private, more subjective relation with one’s avatar(s). In the next chapters I will explore further features of this process in relation to the different orders and dimensions of subjectivity, identity and selfhood, all from the personal perspectives of each of the selected artists for this research.

At this point I would like to introduce my avatar *Lacan Galicia*¹² who ‘conducted’ research in SL. In actual life I embody Lacan, the jumping off point being one important fundament: that the virtual exists, that it has always existed throughout the history of humanity—humans being selves who imagine and produce symbols—and that even though it cannot be named in just one way, it is anchored in subjectivity. Human beings enter and exit this territory, balancing delicately between consciousness and dream, or reason and fabrication. Historically, artists have been especially doted for describing the passing from one world to another and are inclined towards the ‘manufacture’ of possible intelligible or ‘express-able’ representations of the bridge between the real and the imaginary. In this sense Lacan Galicia reveals that the virtual wears the badge of its etymology: to the (most common) meaning of *virtual* as ‘almost like’ (something almost like x, y or z), one can add *virtus*, meaning the virtuous—in a way, the ideal(ised), or that which could be ‘in place of’. Virtual, in short, means the existence of a parallel existence that can be represented in the imagination, or mythically as utopia or dystopia—paradise or hell respectively (Bittarello). In this respect, I would like to specify that I understand the virtual not only as connected to a world hyper saturated by information from the web, imaginative virtual games, virtual reality, MUVes (multi user virtual environments) and

¹² Lacan Galicia is my first and principal avatar (I have two others who are female). ‘He’ is in charge of conducting research for my thesis in SL. Lacan’s ‘physical’ appearance is an issue of constant analysis and modification. Lately he has acquired and developed a more stable and ‘mature’ personality, ad-hoc to his new responsibilities as a preferred witness, researcher and Media Studies Scholar in virtual worlds.

MMORPGs (multi media online role play games). Before assuming his 'new' role as a virtual researcher, *Lacan Galicia*'s forays in SL demonstrated that the virtual is also a factor in less glamorous processes, but equally defining in the current relation human-technology-information, such as the pervasiveness of information from surveillance technology (for example my avatar has been ejected on a few occasions, for different reasons, from sites in SL while testing the most common, yet not visible, surveillance devices in that environment), social networking and smart mobile telephony, nano technology and biotech research (inserted in what is known as bio-politics or bio-power, which, by the way, led to his meeting one of the artists now included in this research). This means that the flux of information defines, connects and interpenetrates many more human domains than are known.



**Figure 3: Lacan Galicia in Odyssey
(Personal Screenshot from Second Life)**

The experiences I have enjoyed through *Lacan* (and my other two avatars) make it clear that if human beings have the real experience of virtual worlds, it is through the arrangements of our sensorial/intellectual systems: in a virtual environment, our perception indicates to us that, except for the absence of physical materiality, one is

otherwise in a ‘real’ functional world perceptually speaking in which (what’s more), via a being one embodies, one can move and express ourselves, manipulate objects and interact with other social actors. In fact, given certain circumstances, this very absence of materiality converts the experience of embodiment in virtual self in an absorbing and captivating activity that raises new forms of relating to perception, knowledge, information, subjectivity and socialisation. The analysis of all of these phenomena, from the point of view of the constant reshaping of our own ontologies and epistemologies on the digital, the virtual, the interactive, and the *ethics* and *aesthetics* produced by a doubled existence via a liminal personality anchored in an enhanced subjectivity, puts in the foreground the distributive, yet diffuse characteristics of a (new) media studies perspective.

1.4.4 Media and Telematic Culture Involved in the Idea of the Virtual

At the time of my master’s thesis in New Media and Virtual Aesthetics, I became familiar with a simple, yet decisive theoretical-methodological framing in which two fundamental principles constitute the iconographic legacy of the optic revolution of the late nineteenth century:

1. The birth of the ‘visual’ as a result of the dichotomy between image and vision; and
2. The emergence of telematic media culture as a result of the new immaterialised reality of signs.

In the first case, if, before photography, an image ‘was’ a painting, now ‘visual(ity)’ has to be extended to include newer expressions: photography, film, TV, and, later on, video and digital images. Image and vision become a dichotomy, each one split from the other. The encounter between the image and the technical medium produces the birth of the ‘visual,’ and without this *extension-displacement* of the visual, it is almost impossible to understand the origins and evolution of current digital and virtual art. In the second case, the split between body and message occasioned by the telegraph (and the scanning principle) around 1840—suddenly a message could be sent without the mediation of a material, physical vehicle such as a horse, a soldier, a ship—led to the consolidation of a telematic culture: the immaterial world of signs in which chains of signification would

(now) travel *without* a physical body. This was the spatial bidimensional form of a text, or an image transforming into a temporal form. Without telematic culture, information becoming 'spectacle' would not be, as it currently is, the axe of syntactic construction around the art created with computers and digital technology.

These are issues also addressed by Tom Boellstorff, Bittarello, Yee & Bailenson and Castronova who, in relation to my research, hold a special place for methodological and hermeneutic reasons. In the configuration of the virtual and its space of techno-social meaning, there exists a wide variety of factors and aspects of importance. Some of the keys ones have to do with conceptualisations on time and space (Benedikt), the relation of physical body to virtual representation and behaviour (behaviour studies and virtual worlds), artificiality and representation (Handan Vicdan and Enrique Becerra) and philosophical-cultural aspects of the virtual, the subjective, the other and the self (Dorothea Olkowsky, Jean Baudrillard and Deleuze & Parnet). In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff concedes that the impulse (and desire) for the virtual is a constant in the history of humanity. He sees the development and conquest of this 'dream' as dependent on two principle factors: the evolution of human technology, and the rituals and cultural practices through which humans experience contact with the universe, which allows them to set out standard symbols, images and myths that give intelligibility to their existence. With the merging of technologies of vision, beginning by the end of the nineteenth century, with those of computation and information in the second half of the twentieth, plus contemporary forms of arts (in particular the visual arts) Boellstorff identifies what he calls a "second history of virtual worlds" (36), the key moment in the conformation of the conceptual universe and the ad-hoc technologies of virtual worlds as they are known today. To these, Boellstorff adds literature (science fiction and fantastical literature), the arts of the image, the accelerated progression of video games at the beginning of the eighties, and computers and online games of our day. He concludes that independent of the interpretative variations of the residents in SL (or perhaps precisely because of them) there exists a shared SL "enduring cultural logic" (64).

In my opinion, Boellstorff articulates technical media to represent the immersive image with the ability to develop true interactions between actors, defining them as key elements in the cultural production of attitudes, abilities and values regarding virtual worlds, with the objective of demonstrating how one ‘inhabits’ them and takes possession of the technological creations of humans. Boellstorff’s educated perspective (trained as an ethnographer and anthropologist) on the emergence of virtual worlds, specifically SL, as a sophisticated product of human abilities, technologies and sociability appears to me to be crucial for an understanding, at the heart of virtual world aesthetics, of the use of the term *techne*. This is the perspective from which Boellstorff conceptualises the cultural logic of the virtual in SL. SL emblematises what he calls the “Age of Techne” (2008 116), that is to say, the transformation of augmented immersion (by technology) into augmentation of sensory immersion, through which “social immersion” is attained. This is the assumed effect of *techne*. As an artist myself, as well as an academic with some knowledge of visual semiotics, I fully agree with Boellstorff’s notion of the “virtually human”, meaning that humans have always been virtual selves because the nature of humanity is to experiment life through culture (our “killer app”). Virtual worlds show us how actual life has always been virtual. However, this comes with a certain degree of imbalance because this virtual human being, within virtual worlds, implies a reconfiguration of new possibilities for the human capacity for “place-making, subjectivity and community” (2008 5). Boellstorff sustains that virtual worlds can be studied on their own terms, independent of the close relation between the real and virtual, but there does exist an interdependence, extension and interpenetration between the worlds. He maintains that virtual sociality cannot be explained only from the current (real): virtual society ‘refers to’ the real, but is independent and not only derivative of it (2008 63).

This is an important point that reconciles with those established by virtual world researchers such as Velleman, Yee & Bailenson, Vicdan and others, in the sense that avatars, although ‘responding’ to human minds and will, develop standards of socialisation, expressivity and even their ‘own’ personalities coherent with the dynamic of the virtual environment, to such an extent that they influence (in return) the behaviour

and affectivity of users in the real world. “Avatars make virtual worlds real, not actual: they are a position from which the self encounters the virtual” (129).

1.5 Computers are Social Actors. A Combined Perspective from Aesthetics Might Explain Why

I consider the concept of *distributed aesthetics* to be intimately related to the above theoretical perspectives, especially with the tools, processes and design factors involved in the representational, cognitive and attitudinal characteristics that avatars embody in SL. In *Introduction to Human-Centered Visualization Environments*, a particular definition of design is used in this sense, one that examines in great detail the relation existing, for the design of HCVE (human-centred virtual environments), between the domain of visualisation and HCI (human computer interaction). Human abilities such as perception, cognition and psychomotor activity are naturally adapted to operate in this articulation through a multimodal procedure, which explains the natural reaction people have to computers, virtual environments, navigation and avatars, conferring on them the status of social actors (Kerran et. al. 81-82).

Such a theoretical consideration would certainly contribute to synthesising the dichotomy of the distributed aesthetic/cognitive process: the passing of experiences from the interior or individual level to an exterior or group one with the objective of making representation external and observable. In this regard it is worth noting that in the distributed aesthetics theory formulated by Munster, the concept of space of reciprocity present in SL (and electronic virtual art aesthetics) work as axiological dimensions introduced by the constant reformulation and shaping of our ‘own’ epistemologies about these new media. As I expect to demonstrate in the examination of my case studies, the artwork of the artists selected for this thesis, demonstrates that these dimensions or pulsing factors are articulating and merging—I think—in a relatively new productive dialogue to the whole of the Web and digital world aesthetics. This is a ‘new’ trend being followed by Vito Campanelli in his Web Aesthetics theory. With clear influences from Dewey’s

Aesthetics, two concepts “are essential to the specificity of the aesthetic experience in digital networks and on the Web: that of ‘diffuse aesthetics’, and that of memes”:¹³

Diffuse Aesthetics is a typical feature of a world like the present one, that has turned into a global shop. In it, objects people and experience conform to a diffuse aesthetical dimension. As everything becomes aesthetic, the debasement of value that typifies modernity proceeds apace, as does the ubiquity of the spectacle that typifies the postmodern age. (Campanelli 58)

In order to assign a proper *locus* to my own SL avatar Lacan Galicia as an advantaged witness and researcher in SL, I stress as significant, the overlapping articulation of both distributed and diffuse aesthetics. Campanelli recognises that if the preferred analytical angle is that of virtual interactive art as an aesthetics of digital networks, then research in any of the respective fields (diffuse and distributed) is confluent one to the other in that—quoting Munster in an article in *Fiber Culture* No. 7—“contemporary aesthetic forms are not only *disseminated* in ‘techno-social networks’, but are also *made* of them” (73).

In the respective chapters for each artist and in the conclusion of this study, I will dig deeper into Campanelli’s theory in order to demonstrate how the study of avatar features, behaviours and ethos in Second Life, especially when approached from distributed aesthetics and new media perspectives, may contribute to the general theory of virtual worlds, and may also reinforce the use of multimodal perspectives around variables for the design of a future 3D web, based on interacting avatars. If one ‘self’ performs in avatar ‘mode’ a double affective operation takes place on the perception and interaction domains in virtual worlds: first, the “avatar-body”, as the means through which a resident or player becomes an *actant*, represents, in semiotic terms, a “‘position’ in both physical and enunciatinal meaning.” This happens because of the developing of a particular sense of presence, that of ‘being there’ as ‘another oneself’, which implies an extension of the *actual* self.

¹³ “[I] also see in the Web the ideal breeding ground for that mode of transmission of culture that takes place through minimal units of information: *memes*.” (Campanelli 73) (my emphasis). The theory of Memes: according to Campanelli in the last chapter of Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins develops the theory that “Darwinian principles can be used to explain the proliferation of ideas and other cultural phenomena. According to this perspective memes, just like genes, have no purpose beyond their own reproduction” (74).

As a space of both reflexivity and inter-subjectivity, the avatar is the conjunction of an only apparently existential fracture between the actual body, which remains in the actual world, whereas its representation moves to the virtual world. The player simultaneously lives in both the virtual and the actual environments, but his/her self is not divided into two distinct identities. “Giving life” to an avatar, means creating an extension to (rather than causing a fracture of) our body and our identity, and this kind of extended-Self is the reflective consciousness of the recalling of the Self, or the recognition of oneself as *another* oneself. (D’Aloia 51)

Second, the relationship is performed through a “dual actant” that renders identity and uniqueness in a continuum, so the recognition as ‘oneself’ does not neglect the relationship between the self (self as another ‘oneself’) in the virtual, with the self other (otherness) in actual life. However, in the case of SL environment (categorised by a semi-subjective visual frame), the dual actant also “interferes with the nature of the relationship with Otherness:”

the role played by the avatar-body as a space for mediation has more weight *within* the Selfness (mediation between the actual user’s Self and the virtual avatar’s Self) than *between* the selfness and the Otherness (mediation between the actual/virtual Self as a whole and the actual/virtual Other as whole). This obtain to the extent that we could speak of an *intra*-subjective front of a virtual relationship, wholly played out within the pole of Selfness. (D’Aloia 52)

This is an important ontology of digital imagining and virtual worlds’ identity representation, and the art practices selected for the case studies contained here within. In them, certain aesthetic enunciations around the virtual and the digital are explored and ‘built’ through the notorious property of digital images to reproduce multiple versions that work as ‘originals’ (resulting from the inherent invisibility of the source code). This is—I think—key for a distributed aesthetics approach to avatar interaction in VWs. Consider the fact that, though virtually identical on the surface, their contextual displaying makes them necessarily different, because digital images are not fixed entities; rather, they are fluxes of digital data that need to be “staged or performed” while the image file (the original) remains non-visible, ‘absent’ so to speak, from the perceptual/symbolic plane (Groys 85).

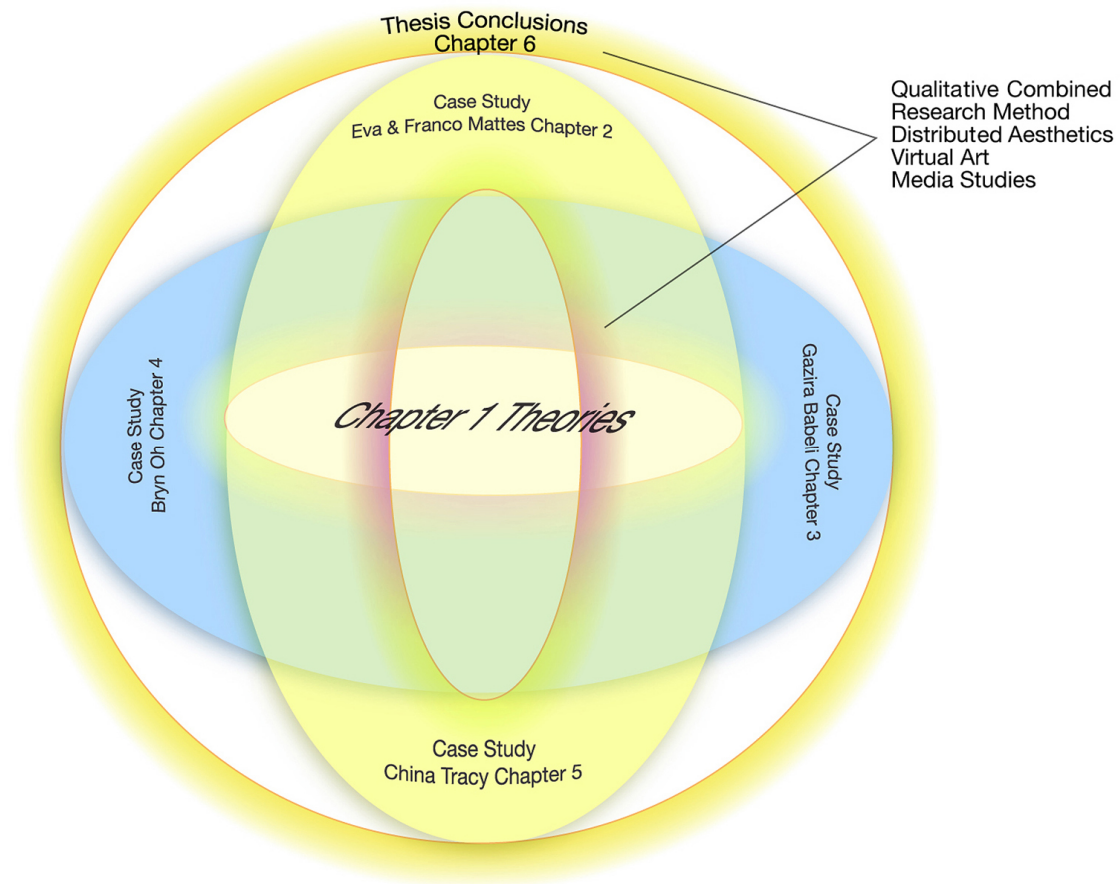
In this sense, the idea of extending one’s subjectivity into an augmented self ‘as other’ in virtual worlds, takes epistemic ground because the incorporation of one’s body into ‘our’

avatar is not just a psychological perceptual operation but, in essence, a narrative one. One creates the conditions and narratives for one's digital incarnation to function as a real (virtual) self, making possible the inscription of 'reality' and 'life', in which is essentially artificial. Whether consciously or not, intentionally or not, our avatars act under a regime of subjective narratives or 'plots', around a former fiction: that of representing our self as one that is essentially another, but with whom there remains more than a prosthetic relationship. In my study framework, the 'staging' and 'performing' property of digital images, is a foundation for the metamorphic and fluid SL based art capability for sharing aesthetically.

The emergence of these processes, however, redefines the relationship between original and copy as blurred and inadequate, particularly for a one-sided aesthetic or semiotic analysis. It is the inherent archival property of digital images (in the web every visible element carries a locator or 'address' that needs to be sited and therefore archived) that comes to the foreground, effecting the inscription of 'reality' and 'life', in the artificial. This is particularly the case of SL's inventory list, chat windows records, and other networked tools. So, despite the low resolution and relative imperfection of its representation rendered on the screen, SL produces (and reproduces) a powerful affective and psychological engagement throughout hyper-narratives, mutable meaning, and the liminal presentations of its content. All of this is heavily loaded into the digital objects, spaces and virtual beings that populate it.

In this sense the artworks studied in my thesis emphasise the distributive character of their respective aesthetic. These works enunciate from different perspectives, different collective treatment allotted by interaction, persistence and telepresence evident in: the ephemeral, the liminal, and mutable of their meanings; the paths to auto-empathy, multiple and malleable representation of their 'personalities' which, on the whole, are characteristics of virtual worlds that must be taken critically into account. These processes converge in the fluid configuration of subjectivity and telepresence performed continuously in SL-based art.

A schematic visualisation of these processes is presented in Figure 4. From a media studies perspective the interrelation of those modes seems to invoke, and justify the investigation on the merging of social networks, web applications and virtual world interaction. The diagram represents them by two kinds of articulations: one ‘macro’ (corresponding to Chapter 6 Conclusions) and the other at the level of comparative examination of the case studies. From a distributed aesthetics perspective, the method design for my dissertation embodies a reliable articulation of technology, visual arts, subjectivity and sociality’s path creation—a sort of paradoxical condition of the ‘individually social’, but also the ‘socially individual’.



**Figure 4: Articulation Diagram for Thesis Chapters
(Personal Illustration)**

1.6 Links and SLURLs

Lacan Galicia (home in SL)

<http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Coloma/78/85/50>

Chapter 2

2 Eva and Franco Mattes – Overview

Chapter 2 is divided into two sections: the first examines the artists, discussing Eva and Franco Mattes's artistic career on the web and particularly in Second Life: their artwork, their aesthetic goals and research therewithin. They have worked in SL over a period of almost three years (2006-09) and, although not confirmed, they may return in the near future. So my case study covers the individuals, the 'artists' the different assumed identities and the role-characters they manage to *embody* both in actual and in virtual or synthetic life.

There is an important characteristic that is put in relief in the chapter: the fact that one cannot be sure who they really are behind the names and identities of *Eva and Franco Mattes*; *Tania Copechi & Renato Posapiani*; *0100101110101101.org*; *Lutter Blissett* or *Darko Maver*, among others. I outline my personal articulation of this regarding their *modus operandi* in SL, the Web and new media art.

Consequently, a reflection on issues of identity (defined as inherently unstable and mutable), the capacity of media to re-shape and create an invented reality on 'its own' and the aesthetic and political dimensions they permeate in their work are also discussed in the larger context of new media art, Web aesthetics and my theoretical framework (from Chapter 1) summed up in the term: *SL-based art*.

The second and final part of the Chapter presents an 'exemplary' artwork by the Mattes: *Synthetic Performances*. This section examines three aspects: why this piece sums up the *modus operandi* and their artistic commitment to SL; how and why this artwork relates to the rest of their production demonstrating a consistent line of thematic, conceptual and political concerns, whether in SL or Actual Life (AL); and, most importantly, how 'a Mattes contribution' to the enhancement of virtual worlds and digital virtual art theories at large can be outlined.

The Chapter ends with a few preliminary conclusions, enlisting the elements their art can provide for a more in-depth discussion on SL-based art, Web aesthetics and virtual existence, to be developed in the conclusions of this thesis itself. An Appendix with the questionnaires applied to them in the interview is provided at the end of the thesis.

2.1 Section 1: A Web of Flies

We are neither artists nor activists: we are beholders. We stage paradoxical situations and then we sit in our armchairs watching the consequences.¹⁴

It is Tuesday, October 18, 2011 and I received an email from Eva and Franco Mattes, a duo of Italian artists from Bologna. Its subject line intrigues me: *A Web of Flies*. The image in the header of the message presents a glass jar containing dead flies. The jar is, presumably, part of an artwork by the talented artist Dieter Roth called *Staple Cheese (A Race)*.¹⁵ In the text accompanying the image, something bizarre, even a bit shocking, is revealed: the work is a fake, or better stated, invented. Roth never made the piece; it is just another prank planned, executed and transformed into a piece of *art* (and with a little help from the media) by the Mattes, as they are also commonly known.

¹⁴ The Mattes, quoted in an interview by Quaranta 2009 38.

¹⁵ <http://www.dieter-roth-foundation.com/en>



Figure 5: *Rot*, Eva and Franco Mattes, 2011. Fake Dieter Roth Sculpture. White Flag Projects (Gallery), Saint Louis, Missouri. (November 10, 2011. <<http://0100101110101101.org/home/rot/index.html>>)

This summer White Flag Projects in Saint Louis held an interesting exhibition called Another Kind of Vapor. Taking inspiration from Dieter Roth's work the show presented artists who use non-traditional and decaying materials, such as Paul McCarthy, Ed Ruscha and Dieter Roth himself.

Roth's piece in the show was a glass jar containing flies collected by the artist from his legendary work Staple Cheese (A Race), 1970. This work has disappeared long ago, thrown away in the desert by the gallery owner, nothing else remains beside this 40-year-old jar full of dead flies.

Unfortunately Dieter Roth never made this work, it's a fake. We invented it one evening in a bar with our friend Corazon Del Sol, and put it together the next day. We bought all the stuff on the internet: an old glass jar, a vintage cork and lots of flies (yes, you can buy flies online), and sent the work to the unaware curators.

The piece has been shown for over a month, and nobody questioned its authenticity or worthiness. **The image of the jar with flies started circulating on the Internet and it's also mentioned in Roth's biography in Wikipedia.**

Maybe one day the jar would have been included in other Dieter Roth shows, and, who knows, even sold for a lot of money.

*Sometimes we tend to prefer facts we wish to be true, rather than facts we know to be true. Maybe the little jar fulfilled our desire that the Dieter Roth legendary work wasn't completely lost. Believing is seeing.*¹⁶ (my emphasis)

I would like to stress two elements in this email that I'm using to introduce the Mattes' case study: on the one hand, one sees a *fake art piece*, the authorship of which is attributed to another artist. On the other, one has a processing through media that *converts* the plot into a *real* event circulating in cyberspace thanks to the diffusion of a virtual electronic message embedded in a flux of binary data: an email, an image with an explanatory text on a website, etc.

2.1.1 Hoaxes and Pranks May Sometimes Elicit Sincere Reactions: Media and *Medium*

I would describe the Mattes artwork broadly as a constructed *media-myth-making* fabric of possibilities, threaded as aesthetic strategies that are designed and (usually) performed to obtain massive visibility and presence on the Web, social networks, virtual worlds, and the contemporary art scene. These formats allow them to engage critically in collective public aesthetic exchange, viscerally exposing the sheer arsenal these technologies offer for assembling *virtual meaning-making* machines.

Through this kind of aesthetic work, the Mattes unveil and emphasise today's capacity for media and digital technology to influence, modify, multiply, produce (and re-produce) *reality* as information. They critically point to this phenomena, alerting us to the disturbing mono-discursive 'format' to which media and political power markets this as a *unified* compound in which the distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' has become obsolete, indistinguishable or, frankly, blurred by its frenetic distribution through global communication networks.

¹⁶ Franco Mattes, email message to author, October 18, 2011. See also <http://0100101110101101.org/propaganda.php> (Eva and Franco Mattes official website).

Put differently: the Mattes' main objective is to access the Web, art and media, through pranks, fictitious narratives and hoaxes, but also through provocation, surprise and shock, getting public attention and amplified reactions to the plots they display in the form of artwork and interventions via networked media. The Mattes use media, including cyberspace and virtual worlds, as their artistic *medium*.

Examining their SL-based artwork period (2006-09), their goals, motivations and *flickering* strategies led me to observe their avatars in the role of media artists, to find out how and why they configure their aesthetic experiences the way they do and how these were (are) exchanged between both worlds, the virtual and the real (actual). From a methodological point of view this is viable by centering attention on an exemplary SL artwork: *Synthetic Performances*¹⁷ (SP) and locating this in the context of the artists' *modus operandi* and their particular aesthetic commitments. Consequently, through a combined (or multidisciplinary) perspective explained in my theoretical framework, plus the examination of their answers to a set of questionnaires, I have come to a broader, and hopefully deeper, understanding of their art and the personalities they invented in SL. It is my claim that examining these elements will allow me to sketch a number of 'features' or ways of doing things that may feed a theoretical lucubration around them, the report of which is the outcome of this Chapter.

2.1.1.1 Stealing, Re-Enacting and Expropriating: The Mattes' Heuristics of Digital Art

Below is the list of artwork from the Mattes' official website (<http://0100101110101101.org>) corresponding to the *Projects* section, where one may appreciate a retrospective panorama of their work back to 1994. The list includes the official name of the piece and a short description.

2011 *Rot Fake*. Fake Dieter Roth sculpture. (A Web of Flies. A fake art piece attributed to another artist.)

¹⁷ *Synthetic Performances* is a complex artwork still considered by the Mattes as a *work in progress*. However, in order to develop reflections on the artists' trajectory in both Second Life and the Web, on their role as interactive media electronic artists, I will refer to selected parts, such as one in which the Mattes re-enact famous performances from the seventies, and also one of their own pieces.

- 2011 *Colorless, odourless and tasteless.* Customized arcade game (An old arcade game is customized to fit an engine that spews carbon monoxide while playing. The more you progress in the game, the greater your chances of asphyxiation.)
- 2010 *Catt.* Fake Cattelan sculpture. (A fake sculpture attributed to Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan turned out to be an Art Prank)
- 2010 *Plan C.* A secretive project in Chernobyl (The artists went to Chernobyl to develop a secretive Plan C...*The Liquidator*, a mysterious interactive sculpture built from remnants and debris from Chernobyl, which was installed overnight in Manchester's Whitworth Park, UK)
- 2010 *My Generation.* Found footage. (Video Collage, broken computer, mocking viral videos and other 'age of computers' myths.)
- 2010 *Freedom.* Online Performance. (Performance playing in a computer game.)
- 2010 *No Fun.* Online Performance. (A male character hanging from his neck in an apartment while broadcasting online. This is a prank suggesting to the online public that they are witnesses in real time to what seems to be a suicide or a mysterious crime.)
- 2009-10 *Synthetic Performances.* Art Performances inside Second Life
- 2009 *Bagless Canister Cyclonic Vacuum* (Outdoor billboard, 238 x 504 cm. Biennial of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia. With no other indication, logo or information, a giant pair of breasts covered in soap captures the gaze in a public space.)
- 2008 *The New York Times Hoax* (Special New York Times blankets cities with message of hope and change. Thousands of volunteers behind an elaborate hoax.)
- 2008 *Traveling by Telephone.* Photos in videogames (Digital prints on canvas, created and referencing Western art history within the ultra-violent video game *Half Life*.)
- 2007-10 *Reenactments.* Performance reenactments in videogames [sic] (Famous performances from the seventies and eighties reenacted within SL: Marina Abramovic's *Imponderabilia*, Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks*, Gilbert & George's *The Singing Sculpture*, Valie Export's *Tapp und Tastkino*, Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, and Chris Burden's *Shoot*.)
- 2006-07 *Avatar's portraits.* Series of portraits on canvas of Second Life's avatars (Printed in high quality and exhibited in a real gallery)
- 2006 *An Ordinary Building.* Unusual sign appeared overnight causes controversy

- 2005-06 *United We Stand*. A fake movie hits the streets of your city (A full marketing campaign hits the streets of your city around an inexistent movie)
- 2003-04 *Nike Ground*. Guerrilla marketing or collective hallucination?
- 2002 *Vopos*. One year of satellite self-surveillance
- 2002 *The File That Wouldn't Leave*. Satanism, Paedophilia and Cultural Terrorism
- 2001 *The permutation of 0 and 1*. How Florian Cramer plagiarised the plagiarists
- 2001 *The K Thing*. Online performance gone awfully wrong
- 2001 *Biennale.py* Spreading a computer virus and a work of art (At the Venezia Biennale)
- 2000-03 *Life Sharing*. An online real-time digital self-portrait
- 2000 On-going. *The Influencers*. The Mattes' annual cult festival of Media Actionism
- 2000 *Jodi identity theft*. The first known fake piece in the history of Net Art
- 1999 *Merry Christmas '99*. Amy Alexander's copy of 0100101110101101.ORG
- 1999 *Copies*. Carrying fake over to a digital format for the first time
- 1998-99 *Hybrids*. Online Net Art collages
- 1998-99 *Vaticano.org*. The First Internet Coup (A Website clone of the Vatican.org is launched as a prank for the public and the Vatican authorities.)
- 1998-99 *Darko Maver*. The most famous made-up artist
- 1994-00 *Luther Blissett*. A multi-use name adopted by hundreds of people all over Europe

Throughout their career the Mattes have created artwork with an interesting yet controversial impact on media, art and web contexts, usually through pranks, fake identity, hacking websites and private/collective property, or a combination of the above. Some examples are: the cloning of the *Vatican website* (the Mattes distributed unofficial, invented and funny moral guidelines); the *Darko Maver Project* (a fake Slovenian artist who became very successful in the media); *The K Thing*, which was a mix-up of files and folders in an online exhibition in Seoul ('plagiarising' and rearranging participating

artists' websites in such a way that they became disassociated from their own work); spreading a computer virus called *Biennale.py* (their contribution to the 2001 Venice Biennale); *Life_Sharing*, in which they openly shared the full content of their computers with online public); and *Vopos*, in which they put themselves under uninterrupted satellite surveillance for a year.

These works belong to the first phase (1996-02), which seems to have consolidated their main social and aesthetic interests and also invigorated more restless creativity for a second wave of artwork centred on identity as inherently *unstable*, and the conflictive and unfair distribution between corporate power and public interest issues. Particularly important in this sense are *Nike Ground* (2003-04) and *United We Stand* (2005-06). In the former, the Mattes re-interpreted the world-famous brand *Nike* into a complex urban *performance* around the appropriation of a public space in Vienna by this world-renowned corporation.

These actions were organised with the purpose of creating a massive collective hallucination. For example, the public witnessed how a world-wide corporation—following their marketing motto *Rethinking Space*—had the power to presumably buy the historic Karlsplatz in downtown Vienna. Nike's purpose was that of transforming an emblematic historic site into a commercial 'sanctuary' to be renamed *Nikeplatz* hosting (among other things) a 36-meter Nike's *Swoosh* monument. On this subject, Quaranta comments:

Vienna was just the launch pad: the historic Karlsplatz had been bought by Nike, and was soon to change its name to *Nikeplatz*. Rome, London, New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Sidney and many other cities were to follow. The NikeGround.com site was designed to lend the initiative greater credibility and to insert the Viennese "pilot project" into the global context. From that point on, *Nike Ground*—like all the Mattes' projects—became a stone thrown into the media pond, the posthumous life of which would depend largely on public response. <<We are neither artists nor activists: we are beholders. We stage paradoxical situations and then we sit in our armchairs watching the consequences>> explains Franco. (2009 38)

A scandal immediately followed in the newspapers, electronic and web media; hasty and angry letters from Viennese and the foreign public flooded Austrian authorities. Almost

immediately, Nike Corporation denied any involvement with ‘the initiative’ and sued the Mattes for 78,000 euros. “In this way the company ended up attributing political meaning to an operation that had attempted to work on other levels” (Quaranta 2009 39).

United We Stand (2005-06) followed the same method: fake marketing campaigns that manipulated collective imagination and so-called *public opinion*. *UWS* is a professionally-created advertising campaign for a non-existent movie: *United We Stand*, a cliché Hollywood-style film starring a blockbuster cast with Ewan McGregor and Penelope Cruz, and having its own website. The plot was simple: the European Union relying on “espionage and diplomacy, saves the world from a conflict between China and the United States” (Quaranta 2009 40).

A different approach was adopted in publicly exposing the insignificance of *An Ordinary Building* (2006) in which the Mattes unveiled a ‘commemorative’ metal plate celebrating the ordinary and anonymous condition of an unexceptional building. The piece reflects upon important issues around the visibility (or invisibility) that media and political power confer (or deny), culturalising objects and spaces, a process that depends on a set of mystified or prejudiced values and partial interests.

I see in these works a systematic approach, the same aesthetic goals and a reiterative ‘signature’. Working literally and metaphorically with tricks of belief, identity manipulation, narrative fabrication and simulation, all strategically positioned on the Web, virtual or synthetic worlds and mass media, the Mattes’ trend is acknowledgeable in their other projects even back to their first works as a team, such as *The SLIP* (1996), the *Luther Blissett* project (1994-99) and *Darko Maver* (1998-99) and continues, in essence, in their current work although on different levels and qualitative variations as explained above in *A Web of Flies*. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that some of their artworks are on-going projects that continue evolving today, such as *Avatar Portraits*, *The Black Box* or *The Influencers* initiated in 2006, 1995 and 1994 respectively and also closely related to *Synthetic Performances*.

The Black Box project is paradigmatic of both the Mattes’ heuristics of art and also—because of their particular aesthetic goals—their politics. *The BB* is a box in which they

have collected fragments of stolen bits of famous works of art from galleries and museums in Europe and other places during a period of two years (1995-97). The Mattes never talked about these activities to anyone throughout the fourteen years. It is remarkable, though, that they were never caught and each of these actions were recorded with some form of media (mainly photography and video): “they have dozens of pieces: Warhol, Koons, Rauschenberg, Wesselman, Beuys, Jasper Johns ... now they have decided to reveal it” (Quaranta 2009 12).

For the purpose of contextualising my examination of *Synthetic Performances* I want to emphasise the importance of this seminal practice in connection with *The Black Box*. Quaranta has commented:

Perhaps that box is evidence of a crime, or perhaps it contains a little collection. I don't know. In my view it explains everything. It explains the *Copies* (1999) and the *Hybrids* (1998), the identity thefts perpetrated on the Vatican, and *Nike Ground* (2003) and even the avatars' *Portraits* (2006-on going) and the *Synthetic Performances* (2007-on going). (2009 12)

By the time of the *Luther Blissett* and *Darko Maver* projects the Mattes had started to build both a solid trajectory as workers and media creators on the border between illusion and reality, as well as creating a *myth-factory*, a proliferating narrative around their own (elusive) personalities and ‘secret’ identities as people, net, and media artists. To such an extent that they have positioned themselves on the media map as specialists in the creation of “mental short circuits through the manipulation of conventions, myths, mass marketing codes and critical-play with *cult personality*” (Quaranta 2009 9) around both the artist as a person and as a personae.¹⁸

At the time of their incursions in SL, the virtual environment seemed to offer them a new model of cyberspace, metaphorically visualised as an ideal simulation lab and *identity factory*. To this environment they brought an activist and critical thinking agenda around the multifaceted and polyvalent—yet intimate—*nature* of virtual existence. That is to say: a synthetic body-person whose representation, status and personality is reflected in

¹⁸ For more on the various identities, characters and personalities played by the artists, see the Mattes' website: <http://www.0100101110101101.org/blog/>

virtual environments and the immaterial context of cyberspace as a kind of ‘exchange value’ in an economy based on online rankings, attention, peer-pressure and prestige.

2.1.1.2 An Avatar’s Artist Might Become an Artist’s Avatar: Living as *Another*

Their intervention in SL soon evolved into a kind of aesthetic ‘categorisation’ in which they frequently used contra-posed metaphors, critical, and even caustic discourses to debase conventional views on media technology, art praxis (theirs and others) web aesthetics theory, media-talk or conceptualisation of aesthetics in the digital media. In another interview with them, Quaranta wrote:

as the Mattes duo note, if the Internet is Protestant (strict, structured, mostly textual and iconoclastic), synthetic worlds are Catholic (icon-loving, lavish and elaborate). And while it is by no means a given that as a product Second Life will stand the test of time, the model of Second Life is set to change our lives on the Internet, and probably life in general. (2009 108)

Embodied by Lacan Galicia my Second Life avatar, I interviewed the artists between October and December of 2010. The aspects mentioned by Quaranta were highly relevant due to their critical and political signification, laden to a provocative agenda that very much guides their virtual art practice, which is essentially drawn, I think, from their concept of *unstable identity*. For the Mattes, identity works as a ‘mutating-meaning-machine’ that produces the effect of aligning politically both their *mythopoeia* and the conditions of *liminality* in which an *endless* Mattes performance will inevitably unfold. In a telephone conversation between Franco and Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, one may see evidence of this:

Cattelan: What is their story? [sic]

Mattes: Instead of making painting or sculpture we work with stories, we use the media as a medium. Sometimes we must fool people in order to get a sincere reaction. [I] guess *all of our art is about being someone else*. (Cattelan 137, my emphasis)

To put it plainly, the Mattes’ *modus operandi* have the purpose of shaping and levelling their aesthetic seeking, to build—paraphrasing one of Rancière’s book titles—an *epistemological regime: a humouristic yet profoundly serious artistic commitment* to the

modeling of an alternative *ethos* in contemporary media techno-space, in which *irony* plays a strategic role.

The experiences my avatar Lacan Galicia and I had while ‘assembling’ the parts for the Mattes case study provide the certitude that, through a qualitative and multidisciplinary approach, assuming the role of a *contextualised witness* ‘embodied’ in Lacan Galicia was helpful (being a virtual resident myself as well as a visual artist in AL). As such, it was possible for me to develop an understanding of them in SL, their *avatarian* personalities and how these were (are) created, performed, symbolised, and transformed, not just in SL but in other synthetic worlds or games as well.¹⁹ Via these methods, the relationship between the Mattes, the media, virtual art worlds and social networks emerges under a more precise light: the aesthetic patterns followed by the duo of media artists working in the context of MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role player games, of which SL is but one example) has identifiable recurrent elements and, above all, a systematised nature.

In this sense, one of the Mattes’ cornerstones is their concept of *identity*, which grounds virtually all of their work. For the Mattes, *identity* is only a temporal ‘inherently unstable’ entity: the very (raw) matter of aesthetic production that is under the permanent scrutiny and reconfiguration of their *mythopoeia*. To me, this is summed up eloquently in the final sentence of the *Web of Flies* text: *Believing is seeing* (and vice versa, I would say).

In this sense, it seems the Mattes’ specialty is the elaboration of simple-to-complex hoaxes, pranks, hackings and fictions (narratives), grown and accelerated in the flow of digital information that, borrowing a concept from Florian Cramer, is destined to be *made*

¹⁹ In *Freedom* (2010) the Mattes develop a sort of performance or poetic intervention inside a virtual game called *Half Life*, in which they execute ‘anomalous’ operations like stopping, claiming a particular identity (“I’m an artist ... I’m trying to do a performance here.”) from which they reclaimed their right to ask and dialogue with other (on-line) players in a sharp and bizarre contrast to the conventions of that hyper violent game. They were attacked, sacked, decapitated or simply wiped-out by much more aggressive, non-passive and conventional players. The irony of these actions relies in the fictitious and misfit characters invented on the go during a ‘normal’ game session. A video sample of the game can be seen at <http://store.steampowered.com/video/220/904>).

flesh.²⁰ In other words, a mediated flow of information is processed by software that turns it into a *cultural event*, multiplied, enhanced, hyper-connected and diffused via web narrative, news-viralisation, online and print gossip, and electronic media. Cramer is enlightening in this point; at the conclusion of his book he mentions that:

Software, it follows, is a cultural practice made up of (a) algorithms, (b) possibly, but not necessarily in conjunction with imaginary or actual machines, (c) human interaction in a broad sense of any cultural appropriation and use, and (d) *speculative imagination*. *Software history can thus be told as intellectual history, as opposed to media theories, which consider cultural imagination a secondary product of material technology*. (124, my emphasis)

Then, the Mattes would put such operations under their usual processes of substitution, falsification and even direct attack on identity, intellectual and material property, privacy and surveillance. That explains why false (or invented) *authorship* to create other ‘entities’ (semiotically speaking) is often present when they want it or need it.

So, at the end they could come up with media-amplified, invented and wide-spread narratives centred on a number of *selves* who have the ‘custom’ of being (and presenting themselves as) *other*. This is what I call in this case study the Mattes’ basic *mythopoeia*. From that, a powerful ontological perspective has arisen to the extent that practically the totality of their work emerges as a vast generative network of mutating processes (on many occasions, unpredictable and *gut-based* ones). In them, media *content*, character and plot *coalescence*, and media *dispersion* have been, despite appearances to the contrary, carefully planned, evaluated, and executed as massive operations over public perception and reaction and its consequent media exposure.

In this way the capacity of media to create a parallel or fictitious reality, and modeling (to some extent) audience perception, reactions and digesting of viral attacks on the conventional ideas of privacy, identity and authorship, become tested and amplified. Hence, the reification of strategies to mock and subvert the *cult of personality*—not just of artists but celebrities, cultural and socio-political *actors* of various kinds—is a priority

²⁰ Cramer’s fascinating book entitled *Words Made Flesh: Code, Culture, Imagination* was suggested to me (and a copy kindly provided) by Gazira Babeli.

and a Mattes *signature*. Through them, they play on the borders of transgression and many times humouristic and politically incorrect *mise en scène*.

The Mattes systematically strive for debasing and denouncing of autocratic power and, more critically, for the commitment to rearticulate today's urgent questions around the progressively weaker (almost absent) ethical relationship between humans and technology. From the highly problematic position of 'cultural producers' (and *beholders*), they interrupt, attack and resist the corporate and political power with art, digital and media technology as their instruments.

The Mattes have chosen, aesthetically, myth-making proliferation, intellectual subversion, media-targeted artwork, and systematic cultural reflection to re-design the aesthetic exchange in society from virtuality and Web networks. With this arsenal, they try to apply effective counterforce to resist the attacks that corporate and political media power executes minute by minute, against free and more critical (or alternative) information. This is what Web aesthetics theorist and curator Vito Campanelli acknowledges as the intrinsic "violence of contemporary images from digital media" (8), or media's ability for made-up reality and the reification of itself via the commoditisation of *attention, reputation and social capital*.

All of these are elements characteristic of Web 2.0 to which the Mattes have taken a critical stance by ironically at the same time appropriating, assuming and exploiting the rock star-like 'characters': two smart people who are also cool and lavish plot makers, *tech-savvy, hardcore media activists and gurus*, who happen to be artists too.

In these conditions, their *modus operandi* becomes a sort of propelling device to launch *labyrinthical, fractalising and mutable* procedures applied to information, reality and identity while being reproduced and multiplied countless times by media. That implies, to me, that their representation of the *self* under different, fake, or fictitious 'manifested' identities, becomes—paradoxically—an *ethical* program, an exemplary pathway if you will, deeply embedded in their artistic objectives. In this regard I have the impression that, when approaching their case study as SL-based artists, their performances, pranks and narratives—professionally crafted (and massively marketed) as truth or myth about

their actual identities—have been carefully documented and spectacularised, thanks to SL’s dream-like, psycho emotional immersive idiosyncrasy.

Added to this is a strong documenting *strata*, thoroughly present in SL, produces: at ease in the construction of *synthetic* characters and narratives that obtain (from their binary data format) the capability to influx live in the ‘artificial’. These are features of virtual worlds and SL that I examine in closer detail at the end of this Chapter using (among others) Campanelli’s and D’Aloia’s theories as well as Groys’ concepts on digital virtual art, art as documentation, biopolitical art and *topological aura*.

It is not my claim that these paths might only be detectable, traceable or visible in *Synthetic Performances*. Rather my view is the opposite: considering the Mattes’ trajectory as net and media artists, *SP* is in line with the rest of their portfolio, but more tightly related to such artworks like *Reenactments*, *13 Most Beautiful Avatar Portraits*, *Freedom*, *Nike Ground*, *United We Stand* and *Not Funny*. All of them are, essentially, *art-documentation* work and (also) *performances*. Despite being displayed in public as a different kind of artwork—some in virtual worlds, some in actual world—they are all aesthetically negotiated as *cybrid* forms in accordance with a model proposed by artist, theorist and curator Patrick Lichty.²¹

2.1.1.3 Virtual Worlds Aesthetics and the Idealised Ethical Project of One *Self* and *Another*

The presence of the Mattes on the Web art scene in the last twelve years and in SL in the last six, has produced impact in both SL and Actual Life (AL) art spheres, principally by unveiling and exposing the radical weakness (and deceiving nature) that *objectivity* and *trueness* obtain, when ‘reality’ becomes re-shaped by media processing. In my view, this explains why their aesthetic axiology is also an *idealised ethical project*, a program

²¹ Artist, curator and theorist Patrick Lichty has proposed a four-category organisational ‘model’ to analyse virtual art: modality, audiences, context and formalism. The aim is to incorporate a simple method for the classification of SL art forms as follows: “work that is essentially *traditional* art translated to the virtual; ‘evergent’ work that is physically realized from virtual origins, the *virtual itself*, designed entirely for the client/browser experience, and ‘cybrids’ that exist concurrently between various modalities.” (Lichty 2, my emphasis)

pursued by sophisticated *mythopoeia* based on their multiple and flickering identities and the enhanced subjectivity of the *self* experimented as *another*. Working always along a strategically planned media presence that funnels and amplifies their own status, image and presence as top media and web artists, the Mattes purposely emphasise the deceit or ‘fake’ in their art while, ironically, allowing themselves to cash-in on the circular, self-referential, semiotic multi-perspectives this method produces. I am pointing to the systematic versions of the *self* experienced through media *as another* to then expose, from within, the evident fallacies and capitalisation of public attention, not to mention the symbolic validation of attitudes and behaviours disseminated by media and, in general, by the socio-political engineering of *meaning-making* practices of first world techno-power.

Whether in SL or AL, the Mattes always work on the edge of a reversible representation of themselves: the real selves (artists) and the virtual ones (*avatars*), and by the latter I am referring not just to the 3D virtual characters of SL (or other virtual environments) but also to the fictitious characters and identities that the Mattes are so fond of using to embody agency. In my opinion behind this ‘staged’ interdependent pair (self/avatar), what one actually has is a number of real or fake characters, true or false stories, politically targeted hoaxes and other pranks and inventions in a loop, the ‘head’ of which is biting its ‘tail’ like the *uroboros* and, in an ironic (*per*)*version* of the story, it reconfigures the Mattes *mythopoeic* inventions. That is what I call a *double reversible pattern of subjectivity* that—I think—can be fully observed in *Synthetic Performances*.

This is, in my view, what Eva and Franco Mattes do best as virtual Web and ‘media’ artists: coming to terms first with themselves (auto-empathy), and then, from the vantage point of their aesthetic praxis, becoming anyone else and ‘staging’ a plot. In the specific case of SL I think the Mattes’ relationship with reality runs without the minimal concern with limits or boundaries between artist/non-artist, creator/public, virtual/real, real/fictitious, private/public, etc. In this sense it is only natural that through the *liminal* connection with real reality, SL is, for them, the natural extension to the seminal concept in their arsenal: *virtuality* is, and has always been, experienced through the superposition

and interacting of intra-to-inter subjective exchange patterns. That is what I call, in this thesis, “the ideal identity factor” (Quaranta 2009 9-12).

2.2 Section 2: Synthetic Performances

I know this steak doesn't exist²²

2.2.1 I Am Pretty Sure this is Happening to My Other Body

To me *Synthetic Performance* (2009) must be viewed as a continuation of *Reenactments* (2007). In fact, on the Mattes' official website both works appear under the same name. What is more, according to the artists (whether true or not) expecting future *synthetic* performances is a possibility. So I will first present aspects of *Reenactments* because they are key to my examination of *Synthetic Performances* (*SP*). The Mattes' website provides the following description of *Reenactments*:

A series of reenactments of historical performances inside synthetic worlds such as Second Life. All the actions are performed by Eva and Franco Mattes through their avatars, which were constructed from their bodies and faces. People can attend and interact with the live performances connecting to the *video-game* from all over the world. The series started in January 2007. (Mattes, my emphasis)

Three points are salient, the first being authorship: there is an implicit emphasis in the protagonist role carried out by the Mattes, presenting them as both creators of and actors in the virtual 'version' of the original performances. Their avatars (constructed from their bodies and faces) will embody the identities and execute the actions, in a virtual environment, of other influential *performance* artists from the past. In other words this is a Mattes live performance occurring in SL.

Second is the relatively odd fact that SL is presented as a *video game* in which people can interact and attend from *all over the world*. The Mattes are indeed aware that SL is not a computer or video game, but a social virtual world. The decision to call it a *video game* remains, to me, misleading and inconclusive; one possibility though, might be because

²² Quaranta 2009 44.

they want to attract a wider online audience. And third, there is a slight indication that a series starts here that could be continued in the future. In this case the series consists of six *synthetic* versions in SL of the following original performances:

Marina Abramovic and Ulay's Imponderabilia (1977)

The performance was first presented at *Galleria Comunale D'Arte Moderna*, Bologna, Italia in June 1977—curiously the same city in which the Mattes were based at the beginning of their career. The performance duration was 90 minutes. A man and a woman standing at opposite sides of a gallery doorway naked, leave practically no room to get inside. The attending public must squeeze through the two naked bodies to gain access to the gallery. They are free to choose whom they will face: the man or the woman, when passing through. The public was confronted with and ‘forced’ to manage uncertainty and the awkward feeling of being forced (spatially) to share a narrow space, squeezing and rubbing their bodies against a pair of naked bodies in a public space. As most of Abramovic’s performances, the aesthetic goal was to make the people aware of, and to resolve, in seconds, the psychological *break* caused by the intrinsic ‘violence’ attributed to the presence (and the image) of a naked body in a public space, its sexualised aura, gendered symbolic constructions, social and political connotations, and—in this case—the off-set socio-cultural cues constructed around these anomalies in western thought.

Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks (1982)

This piece was a complex and ambitious project, a social sculpture started in Kassel, Germany in 1982 and finished in 1987 for *Documenta 7*.²³ Beuys planned to plant 7000 oak trees each of them accompanied by a column of basalt stone. Kassel would be the initial step to spread the planting all over the world “as part of a global mission to effect environmental and social change” (Mattes) in line with Beuys’ ethical and aesthetic aspirations to transform life, society and the ecological system from the position of *practicing artist*, which he believed might be acknowledged and reclaimed by anyone.

Gilbert & George's The Singing Sculpture (1970)

This piece was first presented in 1970 at The Nigel Greenwood Gallery (UK) by the *living sculptures* Gilbert & George. The pair of artists stood on a table singing and ‘dancing’ for a day, following a tune (a recording of “Underneath the Arches” by Flanagan and Allen). Gilbert and George covered their heads

²³ Documenta is the modern and contemporary art exhibition that has taken place every five years in Kassel, Germany since 1955 when founder artist Arnold Bode launched the first edition. Every Documenta is limited to 100 days of exhibition.

and hands in metallic coloured powder wearing the suits that, since then, characterise them and without which is almost impossible recognize them. The duet's aesthetic seeking is reflected in the self-imposed title of *living sculptures* and the refusal to separate everyday live from their art practice: according to them, everything they do is art.

Valie Export and Peter Weibel's Tapp und Tastkino (Tap and Touch Cinema) (1968-71)

Starting in Vienna, Austria, the performance was presented in around ten different cities in Europe, its objective being to denounce the growing unlimited powers of media to define and inscribe sexually-objectified media representations of the female body by shaking and provoking the auto complacency and growing conformism of postwar Austrian (and European) society. The artist attached a sort of wooden 'box' to her upper naked body, representing a mini movie theatre, an ingenious 'metaphor' of the objectification mentioned above. People in the street were invited to fondle (without actually seeing it) her nude breast through the front curtains of the movie theatre. Some European media reacted in panic, viscerally attacking Valie Export's reputation as an artist and comparing her to a witch. Highly influenced by the Vienna Actionists (particularly by P. Weibel, her partner at the time), Valie Export submitted her own body, in her performances, to danger and pain. These actions were mainly carried out to provoke and confront the alarming (and growing) flattening of consciousness, lack of educated taste and more informed or broader cultural horizons about society that consumerism and conformism had caused on Europe and western societies.

Vito Acconci's Seedbed (1972)

The Italian-American artist Vito Acconci first presented this performance in 1972 at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. Acconci would lay hidden from the public's gaze underneath an inclined floor designed to extend across the room, masturbating. At the same time he would tell of fantasies and visions that could be heard through speakers on the walls, triggered by the noise and presence created by the public circulating the gallery on top. During three weeks Acconci would masturbate for eight hours a day. The aim of the performance—as its name indicates—was to perform a deep and crude reflection about the unstable, maybe reversible nature of fertility and creativity in art: represented by the seeds that the artist was 'producing' during the performance, turning himself simultaneously into creator and receptor of pleasure both private and public.

Chris Burden's Shoot (1971)

Leaning on a wall of a room or gallery, Burden waits for a 'friend' situated in front of him, not too far away, and who's holding a rifle pointing at the artist, to proceed. After some minutes she finally shoots Burden's left arm. Both abandon

the space quickly and in noticeable stupor. Chris Burden was a prominent figure of the west coast American art movement of the sixties and seventies, particularly of Body Art. The artist's aesthetic search was oriented to using his own body to experiment with the relationship between the individual and the violence inflicted by modern society, constantly putting at risk his/her psychological space through media and socio cultural institutions.

Of course I will not discuss here, in full detail, these performances. However I will refer to Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* because I see certain key elements that allow us to examine how the Mattes proceed with virtual identity, the expression and semiotic negotiation of a body (actual and virtual), its virtual treatment, and its representation, sexuality and interaction within a myth-making social sphere. These are, in aesthetic terms, the main topics in *Synthetic Performances*.

D'Aloia outlines a complex (better said, *rich*) articulation of 'unfolding' layers of players' subjectivity while interacting in SL. These apparently stem from the temporal and psychological-emotional affect, provoked by *oneself* experimented as *another*, when embodying its counterpart (*a virtual self*). In other words, in synthetic worlds, an avatar-body becomes three things in one: a projected representation of the physical body *in world*; a signifying body that oscillates between the first and third persons' point of view; and an embodied *meaning-making* machine that articulates semiotic, virtual and phenomenological dimensions during the interaction.



Figure 6: Reenactment of Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* in *Synthetic Performances*, Eva and Franco Mattes, 2007.

(Personal Screenshot from YouTube.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTOPZhre50g&feature=share&list=PL93734F796C4ABE79>>

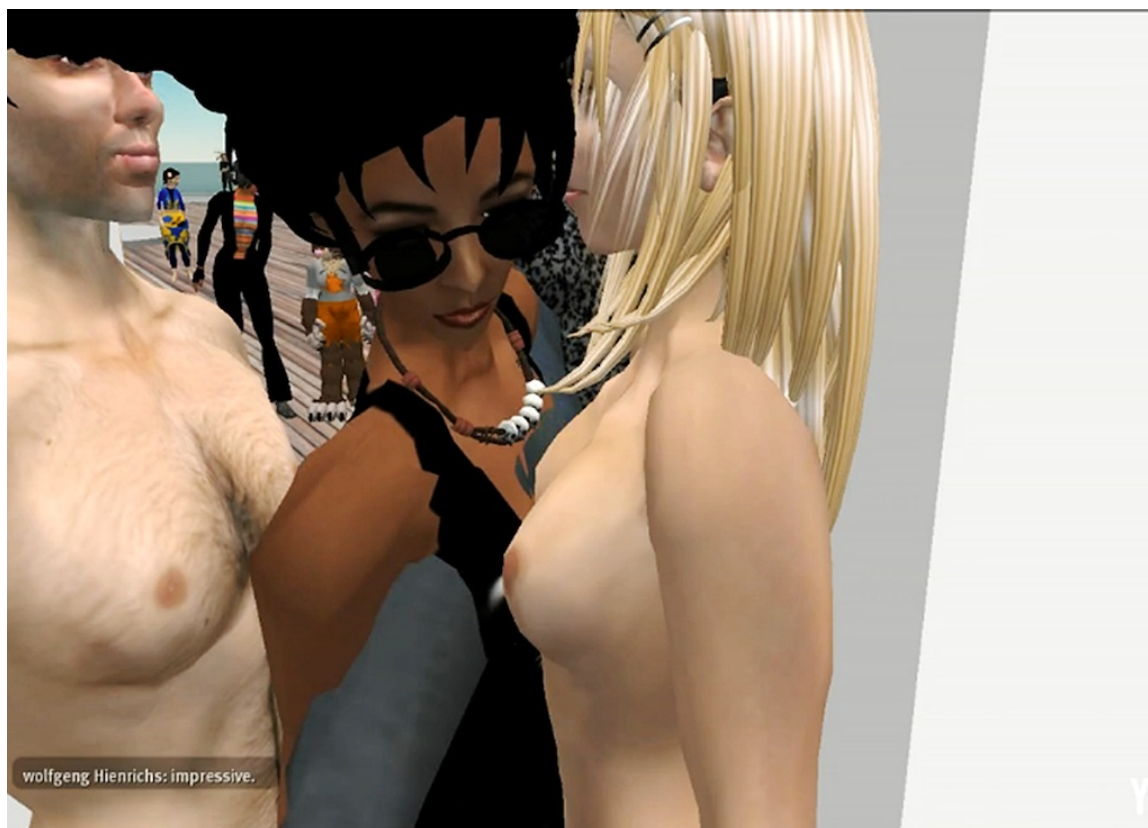


Figure 7: Gazira Babeli attending *Synthetic Performances* by Eva and Franco Mattes, 2007.

(Personal Screenshot from YouTube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTOPZhre50g&feature=share&list=PL93734F796C4ABE79>)

Under these conditions—says D’Aloia—‘semi-subjective’ can be equated to ‘semi-immersive’ because our perception of the (virtual) world and the self “oscillates between illusion and reflexive consciousness” (D’Aloia 53). In this sense the concept is of use because it considers the subject and its ‘body’ enmeshed in a triple articulation.

In other words, auto-empathy is (was) present in the peculiar amplification and unfolding manifestation of subjective feelings experienced in virtual realms. After all, D’Aloia firmly believes that “the presence of a subjectivity that feels the world is the *necessary condition* for the origin of sense” (51, my emphasis). In the Mattes’ synthetic version of *Imponderabilia* one sees, for instance, Eva’s avatar personifying a blond, 3D digital

‘incarnation’ that is not Abramovic but herself (Eva), an SL resident borrowing the historic role of Abramovic who, by the way, in the original performance of 1977 was indeed ‘acting’ and representing no one else but *herself*: that is, a role character, that of the (famous) performance artist Abramovic, hence *one* as *another* (curiously enough—one might say—a kind of *avatar* of herself in charge of the performance).

For his part, Franco ‘reincarnates’ not in Ulay’s virtual avatar but in his own avatar (Franco), which one cannot be sure he is, especially if one insists on ‘accepting’ him only as *one*, and not as *another*; a humanoid avatar that looks physically identical to the man one has learnt to call Franco Mattes in actual life. These bodies, the real ones in the 1977 performance and the virtual ones in the SL version of 2007-09/10 are, in the end, equally projected as bodies representing themselves as *another*. Despite the radical differences, aesthetic strategies in the art work and the transformation of subjectivity patterns put into action (let alone material vs. immaterial issues), bodies are transformed into meaningful entities. Their representation plays, on the one hand, to temporally erase their ‘inscription’ in a story (or narrative) through the alternating affirmation/negation of their own (unstable) identity. On the other, this process elicits a further qualitative shift based on the alternation, according to D’Aloia, of inter-to-intra subjectivity paths back and forth in SL residents.

This is palpable in the transformation of avatars (for a brief time) into true *actants* in the sense formulated by Paul Ricoeur.²⁴ By subverting, substituting or (even) mocking identity through interactivity, the logics of the performance taking place in SL operates openly, inevitably reclaiming the *participation* of the residents attending the performance. As a consequence, a sort of *compression-then-extension* of the *self*’s triple articulation in the space/time of the gallery occurs.

²⁴ In *Oneself as Another* Paul Ricoeur uses the term actants to refer to these characters or players capable of affirming themselves through action and narrative. He states that “narratives express (represent) worlds inhabited by agents capable of responding to questions such as ‘Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?’” (16)

In simpler terms: first, the avatar becomes a body that performs a different identity (a corporeity, whether virtual or actual). Second, it becomes a body that (despite the previous point) assumes a *character* in a peculiar 3D staging, one whose features strongly bring forth things like world-wide accessibility, spatial/temporal persistence, and the navigability of first and third person's point-of-view. These provoke the avatar-body to present itself, paradoxically, as detached as possible from the real interaction, and yet powerfully embedded in a subjective plot as a functional *actant*. Third, the avatar becomes a *synthetic* body that, in spite of all its apparent limitations, inevitably will be 'made flesh', destined to allocate (in itself) what Munster, Grau, Ndalians, and other new media and web art theorists following Deleuze's *The Fold* have termed *flickering meanings*. In our case, *flickering* is a process that includes different semantic senses, oscillating subjectivities and the interplay of different 'personalities' negotiated in the limits of both worlds. Following Lichty's and D'Aloia's terminology, this is what I refer to as *liminality*, which translates into a truly semiotic *locus* of emission that is not fixed but mobile, self-dialoguing and mutable.

To recapitulate, what one has in the *synthetic* versions of the performances in terms of distributed aesthetics exchanging between virtual and actual *actants*, is an avatar that operates as a body that is another *self*, a reversible symbol of its own (contradictory) negation and affirmation, and a semiotic *fulcrum* of enunciation (of the whole peculiar plot). In this respect I have used the expression *made flesh* as a metaphor of the process, borrowed from Florian Cramer's *Words Made Flesh: Code, Culture, Imagination* (2005). Also, I want to emphasise the similitude between my views and Cramer's conviction that one may assume computational codes as *cultural events*, able to affect and transform human perception due to the *aestheticisation* processes they trigger:

in the end, the decoding of the codes is not a formal, but a subjective operation. Boiling down to either "beauty" or "debasement," two classical modes of aesthetics since 18th century philosophy, these codes are ultimately about human perception and imagination. (Cramer 8)

2.2.2 Synthetic Performances Multiply Collective Interaction: Art as Life Through Code

The previous framing constitutes a perspective that seeks to enclose two approaches I am implementing in this study: a media studies approach as well as a distributed aesthetics one. Enclosing this combination is important because the Mattes' *cybrid* performances define an articulation in the *synthetic* versions by ineludibly adding residents' participation as a principle feature of these 'derivated' performances. Having said this, let's proceed with the Mattes exemplary artwork in SL.

Synthetic Performances (2009-10) is composed of three pieces: *I know that it's all a state of mind*, *I can't find myself either*, and *Medication Valse*.

I know that it's all a state of mind

Begins with Eva and Franco's avatars standing nude at the centre of a large white room with a wooden floor, evidently we are inside a gallery space. The audience (that is, their avatars) observe as the action unfolds. A fast and repetitive electronic beat is fading in, merging the action. The bodies of the avatars fall and stand up, slowly at the beginning, accelerated at the end. This behaviour is a programmed script applied to the bodies, repeated over and over again with limited variations. The action goes *in crescendo* in a sort of paroxysmal dance that becomes 'viral and contagion' to the public (avatars). The action becomes frenetic and, somehow, at least part of the public becomes involved; 'infected' by the viral script or just interested in getting naked and participating in the 'actions'. The rest of the public participates through voice or IMs texts (which is one of the ways of communicating between avatars): commenting, mocking or trying to be interpellators of the Mattes (who do not reply). The opening credits of the performance indicate that the duration is 4 hours. A fragment of it (in video) is available on YouTube (the link is also available on their Website).

Special Guests: SaveMe Oh, Fau Ferdinand, Hilfe Ihnen, Fau Ferdinand, Odyssey, Plymouth Art Centre, Paula Orrell, Arnolfini, Geoff Cox, David Strang, Simon MacColl, Marina Abramovic

I can't find myself either

At the center of what seems to be the large (main) room of the Plymouth Art Center (UK) recreated in SL, there is a large bed in which the nude avatars of Eva and Franco Mattes wait and relax. Voice and IM text entries allow one to find what is going on, and the actions to follow. As the room becomes populated by avatars, everybody is invited to touch some of the *balls* distributed

around the room in order to *wear* the proper scripts and come *to bed* and do whatever they want, sharing or not. The aim is to display in public the personal ways of killing time in bed when another 15 individuals accompany you. The action goes again in crescendo, until at some point Cicciolina²⁵ (at least an avatar that looks like her and bears the name of the famous porn-star) appears in bed (dressed!), performing a funny belly-dance, carrying a large tray of roast beef on her head. Some participants are executing their favourite scripts for a variety of actions: some are having sexual intercourse (dressed), another is praying, others are sleeping, Franco and Eva remain almost static, looking bored, while a female avatar (that of an important SL art chair and curator) masturbates in a corner of the bed. The orgy goes on as the pile of bodies and actions grows and interpenetrates each other. As is well known in SL, behaviours can be ‘shared’ or acquired by contagion or voluntary action, and bodies can interpenetrate due to their lack of solidness. The rest of the participants who are not *in bed* participate by making humorous, obscene, boring or conventional remarks using the hyper communication tools provided to residents by the SL interface.

Special Guests: SaveMe Oh, Fau Ferdinand, Patrick Lichty, Hilfe Ihnen, Fau Ferdinand, Odyssey, Plymouth Art Centre, Paula Orrell Arnolfini, Geoff Cox, David Strang, Simon MacColl, Marina Abramovic

Medication Valse (Pseudo-Futurist Video Game Improvisation Extravaganza)

At the centre of a gallery Franco Mattes is seated, nude, on a leather chair. *Valse* music starts and slowly fades in filling the room. Franco starts doing complicated movements with his body: his arms stretch and twist, his thorax spins a bit, but he remains seated. Because of the ‘immateriality’ of avatar bodies, and the programmed scripts for this performance, at a certain point we observe very curious evolutions, transformations and even the interpenetration of the avatar’s body when in motion. It is a performance and also a kinetic sculpture evolving around Franco’s avatar and its anatomical transformations. At some point Eva comes to the stage and performs a dance with Franco who has abandoned his chair; both bodies hover and spin in synchrony with the music, now the evolutions and interpenetrations of the virtual ‘flesh’ is more complex and, to some extent, naturally alludes to sexual activity. The participants observe and comment via IM and voice as described previously.

²⁵ Anna Ilona Staller, better known world-wide as *Cicciolina* (‘Cuddles’). Born in Budapest, Hungary, November 26, 1951. Staller is an ex-porn star, ex-Italian Parliament member (1987-91) and ex-wife of American sculptor Jeff Koons. From her Wikipedia data page: “Staller continued to make hardcore pornographic films while a member of parliament. She is famous for delivering political speeches with one breast exposed. ... She was elected to the Italian parliament in 1987, with approx. 20,000 votes. While in office, and before the outset of the Gulf War she offered to have sex with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in return for peace in the region. She was not re-elected at the end of her term in 1991.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilona_Staller (last accessed 03/04/2012)

The action accelerates becoming frenzied and, at one point, is disarticulated. The participant's layers of information through comments, remarks and mocking during the actions are a substantial part of the collective performance that, paradoxically, relies 'only' on the duo of Italian artists.

Special Guests: PERFORMA09 RoseLee Goldberg, Tairone Bastien, Helfe Ihnen, Odyssey. Cinco Pizzicato, Eifachfilm Vacirca, Opensource Obscure, Tali Rosca. Brody Condon, Patrick Lichty, Emma Lloyd, Produced with the support of Eyebeam

The interesting element here is how these performances explain, in part, the Mattes' concern with planning the materialisation/dematerialisation of their work. *Synthetic Performance's* thematic orientation and critical engagement is, at the same time, independent of a predefined version of its materiality while retaining, for strategically media-bound reasons, the intangibility, translatability and ultimate sharing of its content based on levels of transparency or opaqueness modulated through time.



**Figure 8: *Medication Valse. Synthetic Performances*, Eva and Franco Mattes, 2009.
(Personal Screenshot from Second Life)**

This is an area in which the two artists excel: the media incorporation (or absorption) of their work and themselves as role-characters. For the Mattes, the omnipresent surveillance techniques of today and the viral nature of information, are channels in

which to seek and experiment with the originality, coalescence, and ambiguity of modes for shaping and multiplying artwork. At the same time, they insert themselves in a viral critique of the commercialisation and expropriation of public opinion spaces to favour and perpetuate the dominance of corporate economic and political power.

To describe *Synthetic Performances* as a SL-based artwork requires calling attention to two components that, in my view, might prove to have been decisive in the Mattes decision to go *in-world*. First, as an unexpected (but creatively apprehended) outcome of the fact they were living in Brooklyn NY (2006), the Mattes in the role of ‘deterritorialised’ artists, carefully analysed the detection/reflection of the blurred or—in Eva’s words—*indistinguishable* limits between the periphery and the ‘centre’ (of the city); meaning that either everything in-between downtown Manhattan and the suburbs was (is) a traveling, mutable ‘centre’, or simply that periphery and suburbs are just like in Second Life: auto-generative centres, conceptual constructions of a navigable task-oriented perceptual meta-space.

In the conclusion of his book, Campanelli introduces an angle I would like to bring into perspective: reflecting on American architect Gregg Lynn’s *blob’s modeling theory*²⁶ and ideas from Vidler’s *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Campanelli says that:

What is really striking about Lynn’s theory is that he is proposing a method capable of understanding the reality and the specificity of the contemporary individual’s environment. ... from some points of view, the whole of contemporary society is a huge shapeless blob. According to Anthony Vidler, contemporary architecture, media, arts and the entertainment system as a whole favours fluid, flowing, hybrid, malleable spaces. At this stage, it is essential to conduct an analysis capable of clarifying the terms of the *man-machine interaction in the creative process*. (Campanelli 221-222, my emphasis)

Second, the fact that in such an environment (“a huge shapeless blob”) a natural move for an artist is to return to a more stabilised and solidified notion of identity. This is when the

²⁶ “My discussion of ‘machinic subjectivity’ will open with an examination of the term ‘blob’, as introduced by American architect Greg Lynn in an article entitled: ‘Blobs (or Why Tectonics is Square and Topology is Groovy)’” (Campanelli 221).

duo of Italian artists actually opted for the name and identity *Eva and Franco Mattes*. I would like to enhance this idea and briefly emphasise a personal argument regarding this transition and its move to Virtual Worlds. First, I am deliberately using figurative (or analogical) language: it is clear that New York City (or any other megalopolis for that matter), as a material urbanised conglomeration of different temporal/spatial layers, does not transform itself physically over night in a way that is easily perceivable by the senses. However, it is immediately perceivable that a certain mutable and yet, if you will, permanent collective *register* as insight is sparked at the instant of randomly experiencing the reshaping of our perception of a place, as if it were ‘staging’ different ‘roles’, the principal of them in the case of NYC being that of the ‘centre’ of the Western world (or culture).

That ‘character’s role’ would be performed by the city as in a theatrical play, a rarefied, sophisticated, subtle and yet uncannily powerful sensation felt, actually, as being assembled by our individual perception and sometimes *collective hallucination*: like that of being in and out of different worlds, within an infinite spatial network defined by the eventuality of our tasks, our interests or desires (our smaller “blobs”) that, in the case of NYC, is always the (temporal) case, to put it bluntly.

This might seem like a minor detail at first, but according to the Mattes, and as Quaranta confirms, there was a major perceptive and content-driven psychological shift besides the *blurred* distinction that played an important role in the reorientation of the duo’s art projects under the identity of the Mattes, and possibly contributed to the strategic decision of embodying them in a way more real than reality: the fact that their SL avatars are *hysterically* similar to the flesh and bone persons that in actual life respond to the (temporal) names of Eva and Franco Mattes.

2.2.3 I Know that Steak Does Not Exist: Life and Its Double

As an extension of the project *Reenactments, Synthetic Performances* allows them to superimpose a number of capital questions and ideas around the complex layers witnessed in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Quaranta has reported too that, at the time of moving to Brooklyn, the artists were in reality not contemplating a deliberate piece in SL

(or in any pre-defined setting). So ‘the audience’ needs first to assume the position of co-author or at least accomplice of the Mattes’ in order to be able to grasp some sense and decode those ‘findings’ that, at the same time, constitute the central purposes of their *mythopoeia*. That is to say, to ‘interface’ reality as some sort of entity or complex cultural process, more or less in the ironic condition of subjectivity, at the same time dependent on a permanent construction-of-media-in-construction.²⁷ Hence the ‘artist-constructed-by-media’ is transformed, *per se*, into the most important ‘art-object’ according to the logics of the aesthetical program above described. These art-objects, precisely because of the reversible strategy implied in their crafting, become ‘real’ as long as their mediated essence gets networked in contact with media audiences.

Thus they need to present themselves (to their ideal public: virtual, digital and contemporary artists mainly) as a ‘remarkable’ duo of magicians in the art and technology of deceit and illusion, whether these events are virtual, actual or hybrid. The implicit ambivalence lying between the blurry boundaries of the Mattes’ modernist (idealist) aims but Postmodern aesthesia (tools and media arsenal)—and the reverse when they switch back and forth from SL to AL—is a fascinating *ethos* that has occupied a good portion of my reflections on their case study.

As already stated, Eva and Franco Mattes are in no way the real names and identities of the two artists from Brescia, Italy. The Mattes are full-time players of the *virtual* (in its double meaning: as *the* artificial, and/or *the* almost as good as real) reality with invented, substituted, multiplied or fake identities. That the construction of these plays around

²⁷ Being a visual and media artist myself, I share the Mattes’ understanding of unstable (and mutable) identity. To me this point requires, however, a broader elaboration along the lines of Brad Troemel: “While the rise of a visually superficial internet art world is the result of constant irony, there is a more grave consequence concealed by how difficult it has come to be found on the internet. I am speaking of the disappearance of idealism, the most deep-rooted and alarming of developments to take place. ... in place of idealism’s motivation for social change is inserted an infatuation with the self, as a compulsion to maintain individual brands and invigorate one’s own status in the attention economy of art online.” (30)

fictive, narrative, surrogated, stolen or multiplied identity is an essential component of their artwork, and hence is key to their original statement as ‘net artists’.²⁸

Eva once declared “I’m constantly making up stories, and I tell them so many times [that] I no longer remember if things really happened that way, or if I made everything up myself. And the funny thing is that as soon as I like the story, I really don’t care.” (Quaranta 2009 9)

In *Synthetic Performances*, art historian, critic and curator Roselee Goldberg sees no rupture or contradiction with the original ones, but a continuous line. The expanding collaboration through direct interaction of residents and players with the performance and performers in *SP* is quite unique (while, in contrast, this is usually not allowed in performance art—except if it is explicitly demanded by the artists) and making the experiences available to millions of people in cyberspace expands and continues the reach and meaning of the ‘historic’ pieces. Goldberg affirms as well that:

The debate about whether you had to be there in the *flesh* to see an actual event (and few ever were) becomes mute in this mediated, fabricated world but also in the real one, given the trend to reconstruct performances that in recent years has become a genre in itself. As the significance of performance to the history of 20th- and 21st-century art is finally being understood, so new ways of re-presenting performances of the past is being invented by artists and curators alike. (121, my emphasis)

In *Synthetic Performances* something fascinating occurs: extra layers of communicational data flow from direct and indirect participants’ interaction. These ‘extra’ channels (so to speak) superpose to the main performance actions, complementing or appending them and, eventually, becoming implanted in the reshaping of a so-called *reenactment*. I argue there is not—*en rigueur*—reenactment but a generative series of new performances. The participants’ layers of information through comments, remarks and mockery during the actions are a substantial part of the SL collective performance that, paradoxically, relies ‘primarily’ in this couple of Italian artists.

²⁸ Pioneering artists that worked the Internet, that used it as a *medium* beyond simplistic techno centrism or fashionable formats.

The idea arose from my examination of their mode of working, particularly in SL. At that time (2006-08), a systematic way of dealing with an ambivalent universe, mediated (interfaced) through a couple of avatar-artists, took place: symbolically ‘*embodying*’, *owning* and/or *appropriating* what in fact is the most prominent virtual-world (and Second Life) characteristic: virtuality is an *identity factory*. In my theoretical framework I noted that this was an ‘obsession’ for the Mattes from the beginning of their career, since the time they took part in the *Luther Blissett* project, “a collective that has claimed responsibility for a number of works involving manipulations of the mass media”²⁹ (Quaranta 2009 108).

In this regard the *Luther Blissett* project is fundamentally connected to *SP*, in line with the Mattes’ particular artistic goals and their *modus operandi*. They, together with a group of other artists around the world adopted the multiple name Luther Blissett. Launched in 1994, LB resulted in the creation of a vast collective of artists, writers, musicians, activists all using and negotiating multiple ‘presence’ and identities under the same name. These factors along with the fact that the existence of LB depended (and still does) on the intrinsic ties to a multiple and simultaneous status of ‘stolen reality’, sometimes conferred, but always mirrored in/on, by media, particularly massive digital ones.

According to Quaranta, that might explain why, and how, “an elusive character of cult status” surrounded the LB phenomena since the beginning. As a product of communication that vehicles a powerful aesthetic transformative dimension through its media embodiment, LB—no doubt about it—sustained the ambiguity, alluring multiplicity, and omnipotence of the digital—and many times simultaneous—‘incarnations’ of Luther Blissett: constantly “outwitting the media, revealing its superficiality, hypocrisy and ability to ‘create’ and manipulate reality” (Quaranta 2009 13). It is my impression that from the Mattes’ perspective these factors helped in the amazing manifold ‘additions’ of inexistent details, mediatically incorporated by journalists, analysts, artists and curators, and general audiences (see the interviews with

²⁹ See <http://www.LutherBlissett.net>

Lacan Galicia in the Appendix of this Chapter). On one occasion Franco told Quaranta a story from the LB period about a “satanic ritual” they presumably did in which meat and floppy discs were involved. Having passed the news to local newspapers (in Bologna) much to their amazement they discovered that some journalists:

instead of checking out the story, set about inventing non-existing details. A calf’s lung, bought that afternoon at the supermarket, became—reading from the article—“the heart and entrails of a small domestic animal which may have been dissected while still alive”. We thought we were manipulating the media, but they were running rings around us, embellishing reality to make it sound more interesting. (2009 13)

A phenomenon that is analog in Synthetic Performances, through the additional layer of communication described above (text and voice messaging) typed from avatars participating (or not) in the actions that, through their content, add meaning and multi-perspectives to the reenactment of the piece. In the following two or three years *LB* grew into a vastly multiplied network around the same unitary ‘identity’ in Italy and across Europe, adopted by hundreds of artists, activists, writers and other people. Mainly for the purpose of tricking the press into reporting “non-events, hijack popular TV programs, sell dubious and radical books to publishers, conduct psycho choreographic urban experiments, fabricate artists, denounce media witch hunts, and much more.” And further, “the Luther Blissett project grew in size and scope, coupling media pranks with other activities inspired by the *Lettrist* and *Situationist* notion of the *dérive*” (Deseris 130).

An evolutionary step of this process is the *Darko Maver* project (1998-99), a ‘non-existing’ artist. The *LB* network provided the Mattes with a resourceful contact list of *Luther Blissetts* across Europe. Following the impulse of a logical and tempting prank, the Mattes contacted telephonically *Luther Blissett* identifying themselves, indeed, as (another) *Luther Blissett*. So, they came in contact with the Slovenian retro-avant-garde (NSK) movement that presumably had deconstructed the legendary status of avant-garde

art by means and variations of Slavoj Žižek's theory of "overidentification,"³⁰ "to explore its traumatic absorption by totalitarian regimes" (Quaranta 2009 14).

Darko Maver is a work of art mature in its involvement with the Web as a medium for art, and is important in the sense that it corresponds to the time the Mattes went online, systematically identifying themselves as 0100101110101101.ORG. For numerous reasons the evolution of the DM project demonstrated the social and political power of networked environments, the possibilities of the Web as medium for media art, and their almost inevitable role in contemporary art and media scenarios. It seems that, for the Mattes, the question of identity is always evolving into a more complex and ambitiously aestheticised configuration.

This was latent from the beginning, so the involvement with enhanced capacities for the multiplication, substitution and networked expression of the 'factory of identities' was—naturally and rapidly—reclaiming a larger technical involvement with networked environments from the duo of artists. In this respect I find both fundament and consistency in the almost permanent avatar-to-real relationship the Mattes maintain with themselves and their invented characters. Particularly Darko Maver, a project whose aesthetic endeavour "was taking life from a rib of Luther Blissett" (Quaranta 2009 15) once the Mattes became involved in the NSK scene (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*, German for "New Slovenian Art") through eastern European artists such as Vuk Cosic and Miran Mohar, some of the founding members.³¹

³⁰ By *overidentification* Žižek refers to the necessity for dominant ideologies to present themselves as *kind* or *benevolent* institutions for the people. Through images and media representation of this *virtuosity*, their damaging nature becomes concealed. For example true Fascism presents itself not as repressive governments but, in order to elicit and maintain the public support, they create the mass illusion of the contrary: regimes of openness, tolerance, serving the people. Capitalism presents itself as the American Dream, the system in which, despite leaving out most of the citizens from the real systems of power, the chance of advancement (or progress) of any individual is mystified and repeated overtly. See: Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. 2008. London & New York: Verso.

³¹ The collective used to be an art group of controversial politically-involved artists of the mid eighties when Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia. Vuc Kosic for his part is considered one of the founders of the net.art movement (internet or web art). They are artists who work with the Internet as a medium for art-creation and not just as a channel for art-presentation and distribution.

Darko Maver was a name invented in Ljubljana and applied to an imaginary artist, whose art work was a mix of the Rotten.com and the “Web’s splatter-gore trashcan. [The] site was set up in 1996 devoted to the collection of images of real corpses, human deformities, obscenities and lesions of all kind” (Quaranta 2009 14). The Mattes soon came up with the idea of creating very realistic plastic dummies (based on images from the war of the Balkans) and lying them in abandoned buildings and creepy hotels; the people who found them started documenting them. The hoax was pointed at exploiting the feelings of uncertainty and the uncanny real/not real nature of Darko Maver’s performances, while at the same time feeding the media with rumours about these dark artworks which were presumably executed by an obscure artist who:

was supposedly a reclusive Serbian artist who roamed ex-Yugoslavia depositing gruesomely realistic puppets or models of murder victims in abandoned buildings and hotel rooms. The models were so realistic that they apparently shocked and terrorized the local people who found them. Considered a politically incorrect artist because he exposed the brutality of war in the ravaged and plundered Balkans, Maver was supposedly arrested and jailed for unpatriotic activities, and there were reports of his death in the Podgorica penitentiary in April 1999. (Blais and Ippolito 58)

It is worth noting that recently Quaranta has begun tracking some of the people that ‘suffered’ from the Mattes’ pranks, stealings or appropriation, and is interviewing them, trying to recover any possible *gain* they had may have profited from these experience(s). For example, interviewing the real *Darko Maver*:

D.Q. - Darko Maver is currently a full-time professor of criminalistics at the Faculty of Criminal Justice, University of Maribor, and at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana. Back in 1998, the Mattes used his name to create the legend of an artist, wandering in decaying Yugoslavia and installing provocative sculptures in public spaces. Darko Maver was supposedly persecuted, arrested, and died in prison in April, 1999. In September, 1999, the Venice Biennale hosted a tribute to the dead artist. I asked the real Darko if he enjoyed this weird celebrity.

Darko Maver - I’m a criminologist, my job is to look at crime scenes to understand them. While, as far as I got, my homonym artist was setting up crime scenes as artworks, sculptures that looked like corpses. There is definitely something connecting our lives other than the name we share. (Quaranta Attribution Art?)

A subsequent logical (and genius) link in the *DM* chain was the Mattes claim in February 2000 that *Darko Maver* the imaginary dark artist and his work were no others than *Luther Blissett's* work (which is the Mattes' work). To me, this constitutes a 'circuit' ending at the start of its own loop through the threading of different levels and kinds of hoaxes and pranks involving digital technology and media networks. What catches my attention is an important component that I see as a more mature element in the Mattes' incursions in SL: I am talking about a complex *epistemological* resource in the hands of virtual artists set out to transform the power of unstable and multiple identities, in a reinterpretation of the Situationist *derive* within distributed digital virtual realms.

2.2.4 SL-Based Artwork at the time of Digital Networked Reproduction

In the end, these procedures imply the reliable construction of symbolic, imaginary (or deceitful) identities as mechanisms or 'vehicles' that can truly transform fictional reality into real narrative and hence open the possibility of *aestheticising* the process. By the latter, I mean the creation and recreation of vast catalogues of documented instances, assorted identities, and archival narratives distributed anecdotally as reality. Ones that are artificially hosted and temporarily reified in their virtual *personae* via *liminal* oscillations of the characters' enhanced subjectivity instigated by auto-empathy. This is what I refer to as the virtual-to-real-to-virtual networked digital *aura* of SL-based artwork. This is—to me—evident if one heeds what Boris Groys has affirmed around the *loss of aura* in contemporary artwork and its aesthetic regime, as outlined in Chapter 1: according to him, a more specific sense of *aura*, and consequently its loss, arises from a closer reading of Benjamin's text.

My examination relating *SP* and *Reenactments* is sustained in Groys' ideas, which provide—I think—a qualitative light by which to look at both kinds of performances, bodies and interactions. In the first instance and after Benjamin, Groys affirms that "technical reproduction as such is by no means the reason of the loss of aura" (62). In fact, 'traditional' performance art has usually left the question of aura and its loss, decay or transformation unresolved (at least within more orthodox art historical framings). In the second instance, there is a question that becomes relevant in light of my combined

perspectives of distributed aesthetics and media studies: documentation *of* and documentation *as* art, in which media and technological reproduction have, historically, proven to be an inevitably substantial part of performance art.

One of the fascinating features of digital information as an aesthetic phenomenon is the enigmatic question of its linkage between original and copy. It is necessary, I think, to mention the issues of original/copy, aura/loss of aura when situating *Synthetic Performances* within the broad context of the Mattes' new media art production, and by extension in the domain of digital interactive virtual art, in which SL-based art is located. It is not so much the question of original (i.e. original performances) *versus* copy (i.e. synthetic ones) for the purposes of pointing to aesthetic hierarchies, taxonomies or qualitative rankings, but instead the realisation that above all, one is dealing with digital information that, under certain conditions, becomes configured and mobilised as a perceptible *aesthesis*.

Groys says that an *image file* is a "strong image" because it remains stable (as digital code) through the distribution of potentially 'endless' digital copies of itself. Actually, what Groys, Cramer and Campanelli stress in this regard is the paradoxical capability of digital images to multiply copies (and identities) while keeping the original (the file image) *invisible*. I want to put this in perspective prior to introducing Vito Campanelli's understanding of distributed aesthetics and 'endless' digital multiplicity, which he refers to as *memes*: 3D interactivity, flickering identities, memes and persistence are the basis, as a cultural event, on which he builds his Web Aesthetics theory:

In my opinion there are two concepts that are essential to the specificity of the aesthetic experience in digital networks and on the Web: that of 'diffuse aesthetics', and that of the memes. Diffuse aesthetics is a typical feature of a world, like the present one, that has turned into a global shop. (Campanelli 58)

For Campanelli, "diffuse aesthetics is evident in this shift from things elevated from a material and formal level and elevated to logical immaterial, conceptual tools" (63). The Mattes' and the other artists in my case studies are proof of this: they also exploit aesthetically the ambiguous (even contradictory) condition of the digital that simultaneously is a weak and *strong* image, that is not an original but a copy, while its

true original remains invisible (image file, code) becoming only *visible* by virtue of its multiple copies.

As Campanelli affirms, “in these ‘worlds’ things metamorphose reversibly as the former to the latter, or the other way around, and particularly in SL-based art they metamorphose into ‘sensitive machines’ or ‘intelligent goods’” (63). When attending a *Synthetic Performance* in SL, it is up to you to directly participate and interact with the artists. You (your avatar) will irremediably ‘interact and share’ anyways, because its visualisation in the virtual environment depends on the construction of a personality, a *self* that must interact with other synthetic beings to become alive, and the space and time around this culturalised event obviously transcends the limits of the screen.

The digital mutable character of information, as a necessary (or intrinsic) connecting element with the real linked by unstable and fragmentary configurations of a possible variable ‘inscription’ in a story (say one of the Mattes’ ‘plots’) actually suggests the possibility of an alternate *ethos* of the virtually digital, lived as a flux that pervades today’s reality. In Franco’s own words: “We wanted to transform reality into fiction, real corpses into mannequins. We wanted to create a more interesting story than those churned out by former Yugoslavia at war, and maybe people would believe it” (Quaranta 2009 15).

The seriousness and deepness of their proposed ‘playing’, extends to the point where they assume, coherently and ironically, the role of SL-based *enfants terribles* or *divas*: bearing a combination of well-calculated media sex-appeal, charisma and cool ‘detachment’ while—at the same time—fully managing the awareness (and mastery) of the meta-narrative potential put artificially at play since the moment SL’s standard residency transforms itself in artistic performance. That is to say a particular form of *art as life* and therefore, according to my reading of Groys, belonging to *biopolitical art*:

Biopolitics is often confused with scientific and technical strategies for genetic manipulation that, at least potentially, aim at reforming the individual living body. ... the real achievement of biopolitical technologies lies more in the shaping of the lifespan itself—in the shaping of life as a pure activity that occurs in time. ... the life time of a person today is constantly being shaped and

artificially improved. Many authors, from Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, have written along these lines about biopolitics as the true realm in which political will and technology's power to shape things are manifested today. That is to say, if life is no longer understood as a natural event, as fate, as Fortuna, but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned, then life is automatically politicized, since the technical and artistic decisions with respect to the shaping of the lifespan are always political decisions as well. The Art that is made under these new conditions of biopolitics—under the conditions of an artificially fashioned lifespan—cannot help but take this artificiality as its explicit theme. (Groys 54-55)

The time in which their avatars acted as invented *personae* playing roles in their forays in SL was relatively short but reinforced their politically-aligned agenda and the challenging formal strategies chosen by the Mattes during their relatively intermittent and non-conclusive time in SL.³² To me that is reflected, for example, in the super-distinctive features of their avatars. As already commented: in a virtual world like SL where the cultural 'norm' is to design your avatar looking *anything but similar to your real persona*, the Mattes opted for exactly the opposite: their avatars are—to the real Eva and Franco body-persons—as 'hysterically' similar as they physically, anatomically and 'gesturally' can be.

2.3 Concluding Remarks

The case studies demonstrate that, in the artistic sense, the universe of SL-based art is a (virtual) world of things, systems of things and perceptions that manifest themselves in a reversible *fuzzy* condition between sensorial-perceived materiality and abstract, intellectually-processed immateriality. The *actants* are not fixed in the actual world only because their material physical body cannot penetrate the screen, but also by virtue of the avatar they are 'present' in the virtual or synthetic world. One's avatar, on the other hand, may host one's virtual hands and eyes, but it is subjectivity that actually takes pre-eminence over biological vision and psychomotor decisions, because—somehow—it forces us (along with the computer and the networked connection) to enter 'the virtual

³² From my interview with Eva and Franco Mattes and to some extent also in others with Domenico Quaranta, one can deduce that they have never definitively mentioned that they'll not reappear in SL in the future.

world’ to re-negotiate the patterns of a different subjectivity, that of computer or ‘machinic’ subjectivity.

Among other topics I will examine in greater detail in my thesis conclusions is the analogy between the Mattes and theoretical perspectives around the issues I have outlined here: original, its copy, its aura, its loss, human and machinic subjectivity, the memes theory, all embedded in popular techno-socio-culture today as demonstrated by social networks. It is the event of visualisation that configures an *original* from a digital copy whose true original remains invisible precisely because its copies are circulated:

The digital image is a copy—but the event of its visualization is an original event, because the digital copy is a copy that has no visible original. That further means: A digital image, to be seen, should not be merely exhibited but *staged, performed*. ... thus one can say that *digitalization turns the visual arts into a performing art*. But to perform something is to interpret it, to betray it, to distort it. Every performance is an interpretation and every interpretation is a betrayal, a misuse. (Groys 85)

In the same manner, the Mattes’ method of betrayal, misuse, distortion and false attribution of the ‘original’ (that is identity) plays in strange asymmetrical consonance with the core procedures of digital aesthetics sketched out above: distribution, memetic repetition, and cybridised subjectivity. Cramer for his part, reflects on immanent ‘magic’ subjective paths triggered by codes ‘making flesh’ digital data, invoking a machinistic subjectivity—that is, only one side of the equation between man/computer (machine) interaction. Campanelli speaks about the other part of the equation: the inevitability of human subjectivity today, particularly in current digital interactive art. Without commitment of the *self* in allocating aesthetic dimension and ‘value’ to the *machinistic subjectivity* (by rapidly acknowledging the potential to proliferate copies and *memetic* patterns through it), it is impossible to grasp a full perspective of art networks and computers today.

2.4 Links and SLURLs

Odyssey

<http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Odyssey/122/45/24>

Eva & Franco Mattes Website

<http://0100101110101101.org/works.html>

Reenactment of Imponderabilia in Synthetic Performances YouTube clip

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTQPZhre50g&feature=share&list=PL93734F796C4ABE79>

Chapter 3

3 Gazira Babeli – Overview

The Chapter begins with Lacan's overview of his first experiences with Gazira's artwork. Her approach to virtual art in SL deploys an intent of connecting humans with virtual and real worlds through 'scripted narratives' that she calls code-performances. *Liminality* is the key for this continuity between worlds through (performance) art in the *metaverse*. At the same time she manages to make clear that everything one sees and experiences as avatars is just 'illusion'. Because of this, representation is the key to making the virtual a substantial part of our idea of the *real*—an idea that can only be thought of as such, if the *virtual* is present.

In light of this enigmatic argument, her role as a code performance artist, her aesthetic goals and *modus operandi* creating scripted narratives and code performances are examined. Borrowing from theorists, critics, artists and curators' publishings on her work, a number of pieces within *Acting as Aliens* (the selected artwork to be examined in Section 2) are briefly reviewed. The purpose is to put in perspective the particularities of Gazira's stand point in relation to both digital virtual art (and history) and contemporary media theories.

In the last part of Section 1, Lacan's argument characterising Gazira's myth-making (centred on a critical and ironic socio political standing against the massive cultural extended belief in the split between material and virtual bodies) is deployed. Gazira emphasises that due precisely to this illusory condition, technological and code programming narratives can lead aesthetic endeavours such as hers.

The first Section of the Chapter ends with a reflection on this process in relation to theoretical ideas around digital technology, network communications, political and socio-cultural standings, confluent with what philosopher Mario Gerosa and web and new media theorists Gualdoni and Campanelli (among others) call the *aestheticisation of social life and reality* in contemporary culture through collective participation in social virtual environments like SL.

Section 2 is devoted to the examination of *Acting as Aliens*. The main theses regarding this work are borrowed from Campanelli, Groys, Munster, Cramer and Grau's seminal definitions on *digitality* and virtual electronic art. Aspects of these are considered and reflected in the artist's context prefigured in Section 1.

Some Concluding Remarks are centred on the role of Gazira Babeli as master of code and manipulation of 'scripted narratives' from the boundaries of a virtual presence that unfolds into an absent presence of her 'real' identity on the screen. This is the *sine qua non* condition to successfully negotiate, diffuse and enhance Gazira's virtual personality and *mythopoeia*. Because one will not know her in AL, one assumes that our avatar will in SL, via a full metaphoric process of Gazira's symbiotic relationship with the real person behind the avatar.

3.1 Section 1: Gazira Babeli

3.1.1 *You Love Pop Art—Pop Art Hates You: Gazira Babeli's Code-Performances in Second Life*

Today is Saturday March 31, 2012, and I am once again backing up my Gazira Babeli database and just realising that today is 'her' sixth birthday. Gaz (as she prefers to be called) was born on this day in 2006, so she was approximately four and a half years old by the time she retreated from SL in September 2010. During that short time she completed an impressive body of artwork in SL, mainly code-performances and interventions via programming scripts, but also *machinima* (the modality of video and film works created from live action captured in virtual worlds).

In short, Gazira's art in SL explores the connection between humans and virtual and real worlds, which, remarkably, does not neglect the role of *illusion* and *representation* as the components that actually attest to the *continuity* between both worlds, rather than marking their split. This postulates a position against the more or less profuse belief in VW theory that favours—even today—the principles of disembodiment. Additionally, Gazira incorporates an unusual degree of intellectual and challenging criticism of both mainstream digital techno-culture and the more conventional consumerist *ethos* prevailing in virtual worlds, particularly SL. For Gazira, virtual existence is not separate

from the real; rather, *virtuality* and the selves, objects and spaces that populate it become subjects/objects of her art praxis. In this way Second Life is assumed as the ideal *medium* and meaningful universe for her virtual artwork.

Gazira's work itself can be understood as incorporating a mix of *virtual* and *cybrid* categories, according to new media artist, theorist and curator Patrick Lichty's classification of four distinct kinds of virtual world art (Lichty 2009 Translation 2):

1. The *traditional*, (also called *transmediated*) work that is essentially conventional physical art translated (digitalised) to the virtual.
2. The *Evergent*, work that is physically realised from virtual origins.
3. The *Virtual* itself, designed entirely for the client/browser experience.
4. The *Cybrid*, which exists concurrently between various modalities.

It is my impression that, in this mixed fashion, Gazira's artwork is an example of MMORPG's aesthetic *liminality*. It is not just the alternating transit between the real and virtual worlds—which indeed is a visible artistic goal in Gazira's case—but rather, and most importantly, the fluid mutable re-arrangements (and new meaningful articulations) taking place between *code* and *programming* components of the computer's software/hardware (the systemic technological), on the one hand, and the (supra systemic) aesthetic, cultural and political components on the other. This is what Gazira alludes to in her work as *scripted* narratives. These stem from the artist's intervention, design and application of code as a *form* of narrative power, a coded language powerful enough to 'talk' and dictate the computer's actions and therefore modify and transform its synthetic realities: virtual space, time, objects and avatars.

Artists such as Gazira (and to some extent the Mattes) excel in this terrain. Since her time in SL, Gazira's production has made a strong impact on the artistic field of the web and in virtual worlds, even producing a kind of social interaction (triggered and displayed there by her code and scripted performances) that gained her an exceptional reputation. On the Doppelgänger site, The National Portrait Gallery's (Canberra, Australia) host inside SL, it was stated that:

Gazira Babeli is a Second Life phenomenon. She has been living and working as an artist, performer and film-maker in Second Life since 2006 ... her non-authorised performances and interruptions have captured the attention of art critics and artists alike. (Doppelgänger)

A number of curators, theorists and authors interpret Gazira's *code-performances* as the remarkable keys of the "golden age"³³ of SL-based art between 2007 and 2010, approximately. As stated in Chapter 1, this kind of art shall be situated within the latest forms of *telepresence art* which, according to Grau 2003, Bartlem 2005, Ndalianis 2000 and others, would be the continuation of *telematic art* from the late nineties of the twentieth century onwards.

Particularly interesting to my examination of an exemplary artwork from Gazira is how, in Ndalianis' opinion, the immersive conditions of virtual environments generate *neobaroque* effects to the extent of encouraging participants "to 'emotionally, empathetically, and perceptually enter the microcosmic world of virtual reality'" (Ndalianis cited in Bartlem 7) or, in Grau's words, "inhabiting the [digital] image" (3). As stated, Grau's point is fundamental to my theoretical framework because he points to what I see as the *virtuous* blend resulting from a combined perspective of new media and digital aesthetics, inevitable and directly reflected in contemporary art history which, according to Grau, is incomplete without the inclusion of digital images, new media art, and distributed aesthetics discourses on contemporary theories of art and the image. For Grau, the art history of illusion and immersion constitutes an 'evolutive' function of art history, necessary to provide the analytical and material bases to study these concepts. This *continuum* (so to speak) demands an updated understanding of the theory of image and art as capable of hosting current developments with computers, precisely because *virtuality* did not "make its first appearance with the technical invention of computer-aided virtual realities" (Grau 5). This is a point that is amply and deeply reflected in Gazira Babeli's work.

³³ Patrick Lichty, chat session with author, May 2012.

For my avatar Lacan Galicia (and this author in AL), Gazira's code-performances express a tight connection with these ideas in the 'form' of *neobaroque* aesthetics, especially in regards to what Ndalianis calls the *audience's dual sensation of immersion*. That is, the feeling of being 'thrown inside' and navigating in both the synthetic (alternative) world, while remaining in the actual, while—at the same time—detecting “the entry of the world into the space of the audience” (Ndalianis cited in Bartlem 7). In other words, this is conceivable through liminality: being 'in between' worlds (i.e. flickering from one to another), performing on a threshold (or access/gateway) that, despite its tangibility in the actual world, functions symbolically and emotionally—performs aesthetically—in the virtual as well.

It turns out that the sensorial awareness of SL residents acts on both planes which, properly said, turns *liminality* into a functional *actant* of the process. For example, in the piece *Second Soup* (2006) a script is released whenever an avatar comes close enough to a giant Warholian can of Campbell's soup displaying the phrase *You love Pop Art, but Pop Art hates you* and eventually 'eats' you (trapping your avatar in the can). In other pieces like *Who's Afraid of Madeleine, Batszeba and Simonetta?* (2007) or *Singing Pizza* (2006), code and scripts trigger other behaviours and transformations as well which, as a whole, are evidence of Gazira's subtle yet ironic ontologies regarding contemporary, modern, pop and virtual art.

In this sense, what Gazira humorously (yet methodically) displays is, in fact, an unyielding, informed and permanent interrogation of contemporary digital web-culture, from which she—above all—“nurtures and cultivates, in her own way, the genius and *Dandyism* of the founding fathers (net art, interactive virtual art, and on-line art)” (Gualdoni, my translation).

Gazira's code-performances in virtual worlds demonstrate that the blurring of boundaries between an 'exterior' space and an 'interior' one is perceived and 'negotiated' as a bodily-centred *continuum* experience triggered by immersion, effectively collected as shared *aesthesia*, and rearranged by illusion and representation. The actions in most of her SL works (perhaps especially noticeable in *Acting as Aliens*, which will be discussed

in Section 2 of this Chapter) can be seen as Gazira's artistic strategy to *decode* and access the evolving trend from *telematic* to *telepresence* art. That is, from projecting and executing actions at a distance, to performing subjectively in (virtual) person remotely. To a great extent, this is why I see her pieces as patterns bearing *neobarque* lineage that, according to Bartlem, would be deeply embedded in virtual environments, games and social metaverse interaction:

Telematic, telepresence and telerobotic art projects explore the idea of our physical body and communities being distributed throughout the world, yet also being linked together via networked connections and spaces. ... not surprisingly, these projects often have an interest in *exploring the extension of the body and consciousness* through digital technologies" (Bartlem 7, my emphasis).

Hence, 1. subjects as the *extension* of the self (and the body), 2. *consciousness* experimented through the manipulation of the essence of digital technology (code), and 3. code and program scripting assumed as carrier of 'magical' narratives and transformative powers are present in (almost) all Gazira's work. Reviewing each of these works in detail is impossible in just one chapter, so I will limit myself to the most poignant elements in her production, beginning with a timeline of her works in SL.

3.1.2 A Timeline of Gazira's Work in SL: The *Second Front* and *Odyssey* Periods

Gazira Babeli's official website (<http://www.gazirababeli.com/>) provides its visitors with not just works, projects and interviews, but also essays, critique, theory texts and news about the artist and virtual world art shows.

A retrospective list of Gazira's work presents:

Acting As Aliens, Personal exhibition and audience performance, Aksioma / Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana SI, November 3, 2009

Hammering The Void, personal exhibition, Gallery [DAM] Berlin, May 30, 2009

Interacting With Aliens, object-oriented performance, during THE GATE performed by Second Front, Odyssey SL / iMAL Brussels, October 2007.

Buy Gaz' 4 One Linden Dollar!, avatar identity shape, March 2007

Gaz of the Desert, movie/performance (*machinima*), February 2007

Anna Magnani, scripted performance, February 2007

Who's Afraid of Madeleine, Bathsheba and Simonetta?, performance, February 2007

Ultimate Submission, performance, Latexia Fetish VooDoo, January 15, 2007

Grey Goo, scripted particles, October/November 2006

Come To Heaven, the artist painted in the space at 900 km/h, July 2006

Don't Say, physical scripted tornado, June 2006

Gaz Quake, physical scripted earthquake, May 2006

Second Soup. You love Pop Art - Pop Art hates you, scripted cans, May 2006

Singing Pizza, unauthorised installation, Ars Virtua, April 6, 2006

Second Jesus, panhandling/performance, April 1, 2006

And a list of all works:

iGods doppelgänger—SL code-performance, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, October 2009

Olym Pong—*Gods play Pong with you!*, physical scripted environment, March 2008

You love Pop Art - Pop Art dies with you, physical scripted environment, February 2008

Save Your Skin, Stolen skins, scripted environment, November 2007

Ursonate in Second Life, monument to Kurt Schwitters, physical scripted sculpture, Ursonate samples, 200 ordinary objects, September 2007

Unbroken Eggs, Monument to Luciano Fabro, physical scripted environment, June 2007

Come Together, group sculpture performance, March 2007

Nudes Descending a Staircase, physical scripted sculpture, March 2007

Collateral Damage, Monument to Antonio De Curtis, physical scripted environment, March 2007

Avatar on Canvas, avatar and scripted chair on canvas, March 2007

Second Soup. You love Pop Art - Pop Art Hates You, scripted cans, May 2006

Her Website emphasises that Gazira Babeli's work has been shown extensively in at least two worlds. Solo shows include:

Fabio Paris Art Gallery, Brescia 2008

[DAM] Gallery, Berlin 2009

Kapelica, Ljubljana 2009

Platforma, Moscow 2011

Fabio Paris Art Gallery, Brescia 2011

And other events include:

Peam, Pescara 2006

Deaf, Rotterdam 2007

Performa, New York 2007 (with Second Front)

iMAL, Bruxelles 2008

Window, Auckland 2008

Prague Biennale 4, Prague 2009

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra 2009

MU and Baltan, Eindhoven 2010

Es Baluard, Palma 2011

ROLLO Contemporary Art, London 2011

Although Gazira's specific SL-period is relatively short (2006-10), the artist worked profusely in the platform, consistently under the identity of an apparently female performer, filmmaker, *second front artist* (and prankster), and *code-artist*. In September 2006, Gazira presented a number of performances on the web that attracted the attention

of artists, theorists and art critics. In parallel Gazira also incorporated *Second Front (SF)*, the remarkable international group of artists and performers working around the concept of *virtuality* as (the) real.

The important mutual influence between Gazira and *Second Front* merits much more analysis than can reasonably be covered in this chapter, so I will refer to only those aspects related to my research. First, by the time Gazira became part of the collective, a shift in her politics of aesthetics had come in place: a more mature Gazira, who was aware of the mainstream coercive forces being imposed on artists in SL. And secondly, SF had started to generate a rich mixture of ‘theatres of the absurd’, code-pranks and happenings³⁴, exposing and challenging Linden Labs’ more or less biased art policy, particularly with regards to ‘contesting’ practices, ‘griefing’ and other underground activism.

SF demonstrates how its members are able to dispute, interrogate and transform more conventional or ‘monolingual’ perspectives around virtual existence, *telepresence*, narrative, and online embodiment through virtual and code-performances. Some of the founding members of SF are Fau Ferdinand, Lizsolo Mathilde (currently chairs of Odyssey) and Man Michinaga (Patrick Lichty’s avatar). Later on, Gazira was also involved in launching Odyssey, “the first native artistic community in Second Life” (Second Front).

In the section *all ACTS* on Gazira’s website, Quaranta writes that “all Gazira Babeli’s works start off as performances, ‘acts’. And all of them have the potential to be something else as well” (Quaranta 2008 in www.gazirababeli.com/ACTS.php). This affirmation seeks to put in relief the correlation, parallelism and overlapping that one finds in her work, which Gazira has skilfully distilled and promoted as her artistic method: a combination of technical mastery over SL’s Linden Scripted Language (LSL) and other computer programming scripts and code, with the more semantically-oriented

³⁴ See <http://www.secondfront.org/>.

aesthetic strategies applied in the invention and use of narrative—what I call her *mythmaking*.

What in my view Quaranta stresses as “a potential to be something else” is essential to comprehend precisely how Gazira’s creative process (*mythmaking*) works, which is especially reflected in *Gaz of the Desert*, a *machinima* work Quaranta sees as an example of “scripted narrative”. Gazira herself puts it very clearly in an interview:

“Codes are just instructions, imperative verbs ... The result could be spectacular and/or create social troubles. I found it easier to call these instructions 'performances' or 'actions'. It makes sense in SL frame-space 'cause the results look more like a sensible real space than a computer output." Almost all of her works, before being exhibited and classified as works, ‘took place’ in non-dedicated settings, where they could really hit hard. (Quaranta 2008 in www.gazirabeli.com/ACTS.php)

Regarding Gazira’s body of work, I have paid special attention to her strategies and aesthetic goals, a process I have called here and in the other case studies in this dissertation, the artist’s *modus operandi*. In Gazira’s case this inevitably deals with her stance on the *politics of aesthetics*, which coincide with Rancière’s belief in the inadequacy of “the notions of modernity and avant-garde ... when it comes to thinking about the new forms of art ... or the relations between aesthetics and politics” (Rancière 2006 20). Gazira’s oeuvre points to a current digital, new media, art and networked society that is, for her, the kind of system of artistic production and *symbols* that allows her to develop a meaningful contribution to the global analysis of society interacting with and interacted by culture. An amalgam like this can be examined in the exemplary piece *Acting As Aliens (ALAs)*, the analysis of which I will present in Section 2 of this chapter.

I will wrap up this part by first saying that Gazira’s is a body of work delivering thoughtful, informed and critical positions towards the philosophically complex relationship between human, technology, media and culture. Second, under point 3 below, I will comment on the ideas of Italian philosopher Mario Gerosa, through which I have come to a better understanding of Gazira’s systematic approach to the articulation of the above-mentioned vectors as a code-performance artist in SL. Her work has resulted in a provocative, mature and original intent to proliferate and amplify forms of dialogue

among new media, web aesthetics and human *actants*. This is a particularly important aspect for web and new media theorist Campanelli, who affirms that, in today's networked global culture, the conditions for *true* dialogue between both "online and offline contexts" only exist as a potentiality, and are not yet fully or democratically developed by massive audiences, and certainly have not been favoured by global markets and first world corporate enterprises. In fact, Campanelli argues that "the constraints upon dialogue within [both, online and offline] contexts constitute the principal blockage to the rising of a collective consciousness of Web dynamics and its spreading aesthetic forms" (14).

Gazira's *modus operandi* ideally points to and is critically dependent on the *collective consciousness* of Web dynamics mentioned by Campanelli. For Gazira this requires the mobilisation and intensification of both off- *and* online contexts (in our consciousness) via her emphasis on experiencing 'language' as a narrative figure, via code-performance intervening spaces, semiotic signs and symbols, *selves*, and the *liminal* dimension of virtual worlds. All of these trigger and enlarge inter-to-intra subjectivity's transfiguration paths that are nestled in pretty much the totality of her artwork.

In other words, one of the keys to Gazira's aesthetics might be the creation of possibilities of new forms of dialogue among humans in both the actual and the virtual world, as well as between computers and social networks: sharing, multiplying and collaborating with the interpretation of new aesthetic *forms* of media and the web. These, for Campanelli, are a requisite to fully engage a discussion on the aestheticisation of reality and its cultural expressions (i.e. SL art, VWs, computer games, etc) trying on the process to overcome a certain "Anglo-centric orientation" of these dialogues "in favour of a molecularization of cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (Campanelli 14).

So in Gazira's case it is not just a matter of complementarities between programming techniques and media technology on the one hand, and telepresence, interaction and digital art critique on the other. What is essential, in relation to what Campanelli affirms, is that Gazira assumes an active position as artistic creator in the real, because her idea of the virtual includes both real and digital bodies and online interactions projected on the

virtual. This implies that the relationship between them is fluid, meaningful and synergetic to the extent that her performances today seem to reshape and contribute to the discussion of virtual worlds and digital art theories at large.

3.1.3 *Self-Awareness and Art Praxis* in Gazira Babeli

For Italian writer and journalist Mario Gerosa, founding member of OMNSH (*Observatoire des Mondes Numeriques en Sciences Humaines*, Paris 1999, <http://www.omnsh.org/spip.php?article=1>) the work of Gazira Babeli may demonstrate a different assumption concerning the concept of *aesthetic* performance and exchange in *virtuality* compared to more conventional art practices. For Gerosa, Gazira is a solid example of a methodically-gained Web and online *self-awareness* applied to artistic praxis; and her *self-awareness* is key to understanding Gazira's art. He defines the term as Babeli's capacity to reside in and embrace a clear standing against the trends and conventionalism of the interactive digital medium for artists who have chosen this platform to produce art pieces. Gerosa has written a chapter on Gazira for a book edited by Quaranta, and in it he affirms that:

In the panorama of art in Second Life, Gazira Babeli represents a splendid exception. Her performances are important examples of the work of an artist who is well aware of her capabilities, working in a medium of great expressive potential. She is the model of an artist who knows what her objectives are and sets about achieving them boldly and confidently. (Gerosa 88)

Though from a different perspective, the idea of *self-awareness* has also been referred to by Alan Sondheim in the same book, *Gazira Babeli*. I will return to this issue later in the Chapter. Quaranta presents Gazira's oeuvre, which could only be shown in a virtual environment such as SL. What I would like to emphasise then, in any case, is the fact that she plans, conceives and performs her artwork on the limits of the real-to-virtual-to-real exchanging. She is not the only one doing this, but her work displays a qualitative difference compared to, say, Eva and Franco Mattes' perspective on the same subject. Or, if you will, in 'contrast' with more cinematically-oriented work by Bryn Oh and China Tracy to be discussed in subsequent chapters, the former more oriented to architectures of fantasy and *machinima*, and the latter more to a stylised aesthetic and self-explorative material in SL-based art with masterful influences from design and advertising imagery.

The difference is that Gazira permanently targets, debases and reshapes, ironically, some conventional virtual-world-user myths, especially those around the presumption of escaping, substituting or disembodiment realities and personalities—views that normally come from not-so-critical interpretations of *virtuality*.

These are based generally on rampant *technodeterminist*, *psychologicistic* and *perceptualistic* idiosyncrasies, lacking philosophical, epistemological or multidisciplinary groundings. In this sense Gazira launches humoristic yet solid attacks against the presumed dissolution of the actual body-person via the virtual, and vice versa, by:

1. Demonstrating how mastering code and programming *matters* for virtual artists, in order to fulfil a richer understanding of the aesthetic possibilities and strategies needed to submit SL (in this case) as a *medium* for artistic creation, instead of becoming embedded in it as a channel for the distribution of digital samples or iterations of AL-oriented conventional artwork.
2. Precisely because of the preceding point, such art creators end in a position in which they need to face (with tremendous efficacy) the incorporation of intellectual, philosophical and semiotic tools (see Chapter 1) that are unavoidable in the articulation of digital image properties, persistence of synthetic worlds, and the merging of techno-aesthesia with distributed fluxes of real-time communication.

These are derived, in the case of Gazira Babeli, from detailed attention paid to both SL *pathos* and *ethos*. As mentioned by Gualdoni and Sondheim, Gazira excels in two areas: *visuality* and *critical intellectualism* applied to projected bodies, on-going plots and *liminality*. Sondheim adds another important aspect: “Gaz insists that one's body in Second Life is not one's own, and that *jectivity* in the same is only artifact, in fact mitigated by Linden Labs, at best” (82).

For me, what Sondheim means by *jectivity* is what Lichty refers to as the ‘locus’ and ‘vector direction’ of the artwork that is permanently in relation between the virtual and actual worlds: “the nature of communication of the work is dependent upon its location

and vector. What I mean by vector is a gesture of direction, simultaneity, concurrence, or stasis in regards to its movements between worlds” (Lichty 2009 Translation 2).

In order for the space to be perceived and meaningfully decoded by SL residents, a performative seminal action has to be carried out: your ‘world’ has to be brought alive again and again ‘throwing’ ahead the generative and de-configurational powers of the database files in your account; those ‘texts’ coded according to their corresponding image file so they produce the representation of ‘tangible’ signs on the screen (in the semiological, not the material sense); visual signifiers that come alive through instructions that are decoded and rezzed or rendered.

In this way all your possessions and signifiers, starting with your avatar configuration—body-type, skin, hair, facial features, clothes, etc—are ‘thrown’ onto the *landscape*, which can be an ‘open’ or closed space in virtual worlds (a house, a building, a gallery or classroom). These culturalised (i.e. designed) spaces have undergone the same process, in a more rapid manner. So in a way one may say that objects and spaces in SL are always (*be*)coming to you: ‘assembled’ or, more properly, brought alive via code instructions, launched and coalesced or *jected* inside the ratio of our perception between worlds, which, at the same time, includes the perception of our own *liminal* patterns.

These phenomena are observed when your avatar goes to a different location. The main resource for this is *teletransportation*; through this ‘technique of rapture’ and remote virtual materialisation you ‘arrive’ at, a new destination in the synthetic world, always arriving a bit ahead of your avatar-identity-personae, brought alive (again) via code. The collection of tangible visual coded goods actually provides sense, visibility and substance to your second ‘body’. To prove this point, a curious aspect in this regard is that when using SL’s recent viewer (LLV 2), avatars are ‘transported’ as hovering female bodies, standardised and rather schematic, called *Ruths*. This is why among residents, the transportation render process is called, with irony, *Ruthing*.³⁵

³⁵ From a 08/04/2010 SLiteChat session (Made to Order Software: http://www.m2osw.com/slitechat_ruthing_avatars#comment-257), staff-person Doug Barbieri, comments the following: “With the release of Linden Lab's Viewer 2, an issue has cropped up for users of SLiteChat.

For another part, Gerosa uses the term “art socializers” with which he *labels* the creative people in SL: artists who aren’t artists in the classic sense, but rather “people who use art as an interpersonal tool” (Gerosa 87). I am not particularly keen on this categorisation because, in my view, it preserves the anachronistic yet ‘classic’ split historically applied to differentiate communication from art via an epistemology based on ‘tools’—materials or processes—that sustain archaic dichotomies of thinking about the virtual as embodied/disembodied, virtual/real, present/absent, etc. This is not much in use lately.

Rather, I think the merging of communicational, interpersonal and artistic ‘tools’ facilitated by digitisation is exactly what allows us to experiment presence and interpersonal exchange between worlds, and this is precisely the kind of experience characteristic of Gazira’s SL-based art, through the accumulation of layers of mutable meaning, instantaneity and narrative proliferation, multiple identities and enhanced subjectivity. However, I recognise Gerosa’s point that other aspects such as the potential for ‘interpersonal tools’ to stimulate participative and shared activity expand the ‘collective’ authorship of the experiences lived together within an SL-based art exhibition or performance (as described by Gerosa).

These processes are triggered, attested and accessed from a single identity (in AL) represented by multiple personalities, some in the virtual and some in the actual world. Further, Gerosa states that “in any case, in a world where body parts are bought in a shop, the list of bits that makes up the virtual body, each labelled, is part of the game. What *emerges* is a *virtual society of accessible beauty*, celebrated by *communities* which are often *self-referencing*” (Gerosa 89).

Presently, SLiteChat does not attempt to rez your avatar in-world. With pre-2.0 viewers, this was never an issue (the AV just appears as a ghostly-blob). However, Viewer 2.0 handles in-world rendering a little differently than pre-viewer 2 and other viewers like Snowglobe and Emerald. This results in a fully dressed AV that has the default "Ruth" body (i.e. if you have a male avatar, it *will appear as female, hovering in the air*, to users of Viewer 2 who try to look at you)." (my emphasis).

Gerosa asks two important questions that are essential to my own framing of SL-based art work, particularly in Gazira's case. In the first instance, he poses a general (but core) question: "why this type of art, which is steeped in pop culture ... has emerged?" And in the second, granted that the appeal and 'personality' of an avatar normally 'translates' into the level and quality of the socialisation obtained, Gerosa wonders: "is it legitimate to assert that these works represent the aestheticisation of social life?" (89).

This is a form of art in the virtual that, he thinks, is embedded in the phenomenon of the avatar's art used as an interpersonal tool to propagate narratives around one's virtual personae to a limited circle of 'friends' within a limited temporal frame, which is a phenomenon he terms as "*social art world*" or "*social art network*" "designed to spark-off a chain reaction of social relations" (87). This seems to lead to a paradoxical form of art in which there is a "refusal to be original, which then places these artists at a crossroads: whether to choose the route of the 'death of the author' *à la* Roland Barthes, or to slip into the cult of banality" (François Just quoted in Gerosa 87).

For the journalist and writer, this is why Gazira Babeli represents an exception because she is able to at once apply effective circumvolution and contesting strategies besides the homogenising and standardising forces operating at the formal level in SL art. Gerosa answers his second question sceptically by calling attention to the possibility that diversity and the very idea of 'beauty' are put at risk by orientations of the collective online intent to endure a flattening and standardising aesthetic. Ultimately, diversity is a fundamental element in social and aesthetic relations. The loss of diversity and the asphyxiation of creativity would lead to draining avatars and SL art of their significance, transforming them "into 'non people', the equivalent of the 'non places' which abound on the web" (88).

In this case study, through the examination of an exemplary art piece by Gazira (*Acting as Aliens*), my aim is to demonstrate how this artist is able to produce a certain kind of SL-based art that does not neglect the social components of virtual environments, nor downsize her aesthetic-seeking paths and creativity under the pressure of social bonding, rankings or peer prestige. Gazira, as already pointed out by Quaranta, Gualdoni and

Gerosa, achieves a different kind of objective: according to Henri-Pierre Jeudy (quoted in Gerosa) “the aestheticization of objects and places (designated as non places) comes about by means of social life. The social relation itself becomes an aesthetic object” (88).

Gazira’s work as a whole can also be contemplated as a paradigm of what Groys and Cramer call, respectively, the power of the digital image to *remain visible* through the infinite reproducibility of its copies; and the power of code to influx life in the artificial, enacting the process between the image and its function that Gerosa acknowledges as the *go-between* feature.

As I will try to show in an examination of selected artwork by Gazira (especially *Acting as Aliens*), she turns things on their head. It is not the social bond that becomes aesthetic object, but the work of art that turns out to ‘be’ and function as a social connector. That is the importance of Gazira’s ontology around the use of scripts and code narratives, their (per)mutability when applied to synthetic worlds, the latent performance power of code.

In the next section I will come back to this aspect from a perspective of magic, code and the power to influx life in the artificial as stated by Cramer in *Words Made Flesh*, the reading of which (along with the electronic copy) was suggested to me in an email from Gazira Babeli in December 2010.

3.2 Section 2: Acting as Aliens

3.2.1 Acting as Aliens

Describing *Acting as Aliens* (ALAs) is at once easy and difficult. Presented as a performance in November 2009 in Ljubljana at Gallery Kapelica, it opened a retrospective solo exhibition of Gazira Babeli. ALAs was accordingly the main work: a *code-performance* presenting Gazira remotely interacting with real people through the computer screen. The visitors to the gallery would parade in front of a computer screen ‘performing’ a series of quotidian and random actions: drawing things on paper, showing pictures, making gestures, even talking to the avatar on the other side of the screen; or just doing nothing, remaining static waiting for signals from *her*, the artist. “One could almost imagine the huge sound/light array from ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’ in

the background, and the only thing missing is the sign language” wrote Lichty (2009 Can We Understand).

On that occasion Gazira (who is an avatar) replied promptly to the exchange of gesture, information and body language. Since there was no operator visible on the part of the avatar, one is moved to think and question where, or who might be “the interpreter and who is the alien, and whether there is any hope for understanding...” (Lichty 2009 Can We Understand). Gazira remained seated in a small enclosed place, isolated in a sort of cubicle, where her only connection to the world (the actual one) was a webcam wired to the Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana. For Gazira, the ambitious pursuit of this piece was led by *code-performing*, connecting the *subject* with its *object* under particular circumstances since both were placed (and played) in an inverted symmetry. This implied that both were left out of the ‘real’ context. Just to briefly summarise the question: a virtual person (Gazira) was interacting mediatically (and remotely) with actual people, through a ‘magic’ doorway.

I concur with Lichty’s opinion in the sense that “what we are left with is the primordial reflection of the other in each other's eyes, and forced to resolve the matter, what emerges from the dialogue?” (Lichty 2009 Can We Understand). The question is not off target but rather epistemologically points to a convergence of elements in line with Gazira’s *modus operandi*, which represents the artist’s own philosophical grounds around the historical issue of *translation* in terms of artistic creation.

Gazira’s discourse is structured around *interstitial* spots between social protocols, meaning that more local gestures (iconologies and other semantic tools), and the *medium* for representing all of these are, at the same time, in the *hands* of the creator and the ‘spectator’ who rapidly becomes added to the performance as an active asset or participant. In this performance the actual ‘link’ unifying the experience of connecting two poles in which actual people ‘reside’—one group physically in the gallery, the other virtually there, whose identity is only perceived as an *absent* presence on the screen as embodied by the avatar-persona—is a brilliant example of the socio-aesthetic-cultural

construction deployed ‘thanks to’ code and written gesture languages operating in the *liminal* space of SL’s virtual environment.



Figure 9: *Acting As Aliens*, Gazira Babeli with Man Michinaga performing *Acting as Aliens live in Second Life and live* at the Kapelica Gallery, in collaboration with Aksioma–Institute for Contemporary Art Ljubljana, Slovenia, November 3, 2009.

Photo Miha Fras. (October 8, 2012, <

http://www.gazirababeli.com/IMG/602/09_acting_as.aliens/actingasaliens_b_Miha-Fras_357.jpg>)

In other words, one is in front of a meta-structured aesthetic experience based on shared communication acknowledgeable only through aesthetic exchange between two worlds, the real and the virtual. Lichty makes a good point when he adds another factor to this mix: despite the fact that during the performance Gazira would *talk* to you (as real people, not avatars), she would try to reach people by responding to the public’s propositions from the gallery space (via drawings, text, gestures, spoken words, etc.)

providing the overall feeling that, in fact, a link between worlds existed, one which, in the end, is not as transparent as one is culturally conditioned to assume.

Therefore Gazira's *opaqueness* ends up being equal to any other personae *on* the screen, but very much in contrast with the *opaqueness* of the beings in the gallery looking *at* the screen who desire to interact with her (the little character represented *on* the screen).

Under these conditions Lichty's reasoning states that "one might be inclined to give up hope" or think in analogies like those of "*idioglossia* (secret language) between twins from the outside" or "trying to determine whether Schroedinger's Cat³⁶ is still alive without opening the box" (Lichty 2009 Can We Understand).

3.2.1.1 From Code-Performances to Acting Like Aliens

Another aim of my examination of *ALAs* was essentially to find key elements to develop an understanding of Gazira's strategies for building a consistent *media personality*, an alternative *ethos* in the *metaverse* offered to SL's educated public. In *Acting as Aliens*, but especially in *Interacting with Aliens* (which is linked to the first piece), one sees how media exposure, presence and *cybrid* interaction helped Gazira catapult her visions, images and actions to the extent that, I claim, her contribution as a virtual world media artist actually reformulates conventional VW's theory.

I will try to explain these ideas in more detail using as a departure point a short clip on YouTube of her *machinima* piece "Vola, Vola" (translated from Italian as "fly me"), directed by Berardo Carboni.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbroeNoRfRk&feature=share&list=PLA570DABFA>

³⁶ Lichty refers to the famous 1935 Erwin Schroedinger's experiment to illustrate Quantum Theory's Principle of Superposition, which can be seen on YouTube at http://italics://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SjFJImg2Z8&feature=player_embedded. The experiment consisted "in placing a living cat into a steel chamber, along with a device containing a vial of hydrocyanic acid. There is, in the chamber, a very small amount of hydrocyanic acid, a radioactive substance. If even a single atom of the substance decays during the test period, a relay mechanism will trip a hammer, which will, in turn, break the vial and kill the cat. ... This situation is sometimes called *quantum indeterminacy* or *the observer's paradox*: the observation or measurement itself affects an outcome, so that the outcome as such does not exist unless the measurement is made. (That is, there is no single outcome unless it is observed.) So there is a moment in which the cat is in an undetermined state, between life and death, so to speak. <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/Schrodingers-cat> (accessed November 12, 2011).

0209610) Here, a few scenes from Gazira Babeli's SL gallery (studio) are presented. In these scenes one can appreciate clear evidence favouring my *opaqueness* argument.³⁷ These scenes present and represent, a *special* kind of *cybrid* artwork in the best sense in which contemporary new media and virtual art is conceptualised today. I am referring to a conspicuous component that is always required: a consistent *media personality* that is able to 'flow' and connect to-and-from both worlds.

In the scene, one sees two teenagers moving, talking and interacting. They are examining Gazira Babeli's virtual gallery, so the code-performances are actually acting on their avatars who move and interact with remarkable ease and superior visual quality in the video, compared to SL's habitual rendering at the computer's screen. From a semiotic perspective, they are performing a *second level* operation. On the first level, in a theatrical format *à la* 'story within the story'; on the second, the 'real' people controlling the avatars are also virtual, and virtually represented interacting between both worlds via networked communications, as one can see in the clip (two young people in front of their respective computers). As a *machinima* piece, the effect achieved is, naturally, that of an unfolding spiralling narrative across platforms, the main objective of which is to associate the *relation* of the two characters who represent 'two others' who exist only through and on the computer's screen.

³⁷http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbroeNoRfRk&list=PLA570DABFA0209610&index=10&feature=plpp_video



Figure 10: Scenes from Berardo Carboni's *Vola Vola* as seen in Gazira Babeli's Gallery

(Personal Composite from Screenshots from YouTube

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbroeNoRfRk&feature=share&list=PLA570DABFA0209610>>)

A parallel phenomenon to this has already been seen in Chapter 2 on the Mattes—I am referring to their prolific capacity to generate online ‘press kit like’ informational *mimics* that create ‘interstitial’ realities, instruct the public, and advertise their work in both worlds. It is correct to say though, that their strategy is crafted from a different perspective and points to different aesthetic goals. In Gazira’s case, however, the blending of media-attention, media-tooling and sourcing, and massive online exposure techniques, is executed, disseminated and ratified as both new media art in virtual worlds

and virtual world art in new media, because that is the liminal area in which Gazira ‘exists’ and displays her work.

This happens without provoking a re-negotiating of the dynamics of Gazira’s identity, her basic premise (semiotically and aesthetically) being that her real identity (behind the avatar Gazira Babeli) must remain ‘invisible’ but always evocable and, somehow, present. In fact, no one knows the artist and cannot attest to her gender. In other words, precisely because her identity’s absence is perceived and interacted with as a ‘presence’, it remains forever undecidable. The point allows for the unfolding of a *mediated presence* that suggests, perhaps, she does not ‘really’ exist beyond the online networks, the screen, or the code-command window. Or maybe that she is just the collective, humouristic, and smart outcome of a group of underground hackers, fulltime pranksters and skilful programmers destined to mock, subvert and laugh at our conventional ideas about virtual existence from both sides of the equation: virtual and actual beings.

My impression is that these creative ‘anomalies’ do not neglect the impact of her virtual work in the actual world; rather the contrary may be correct. Although it is true that Gazira used to appear relatively little in SL, when she was on the screen she was what you ‘saw, not what you wanted, imagined or desired *to see*: always mapped in the same avatar body-image and name, witty, fun and smart, yet distant and mysterious. And due to these factors her *modus operandi* dictated that in the end she—by being the same—became always different.

Under these conditions a dazzling aesthetic strategy was confirmed as *mythopoeia*, to be enacted on every occasion that Gazira performed in SL: she may look like a ‘strange’ character, but because of her attitude, manners and appearance, she is assumed to be a respected digital art ‘intellectual’ (which of course the actual person behind Gazira likely is), a skilful virtual worlds technological geek, and a thoughtful and sophisticated artist that can put a ‘spell’ on your avatar (through scripts or code), making him or her feel more like a human person and vice versa: making you, the person behind *the* avatar, behave like a ‘puppet’ or an *alien*.

Hence, my approach to Gazira's exemplary artwork goes hand in hand with the examination of her 'personae', a set of *actants* and characters in the deepest narrative sense involving Gazira's intellectually rich yet quirky plots, her conceptual and theoretical statements and her aesthetic-to-ethical theatrical behaviour as a code performer and 'disruptive' artist, which includes the display of different arrangements of sensorial code and aesthetic material that becomes transformed in new mediated actions and interventions in the virtual space and time of SL.

3.2.2 Triple Anticipation of Code: From Scripted Narratives to Performance

A significant particularity of social virtual environments such as SL (also shared with a number of computer games) is put in relief in almost every one of Gazira's works: the fact that psychological, meta cognitive and gesture-communication is indispensable in virtual world interaction (even in traditional conditions of limited screen-resolution, bandwidth and server technology) and only achieved through *code design* and *scripting techniques*.

Hence, it is not rare that Gazira speaks of the 'art of code' (in which she excels) as cornerstone to the process of *injecting* life into the digital image (or into the *artificial*, as Groys would tell) and having your avatar 'performing', acting in the most humane, reliable and enticing way possible.

This is a determining factor in the achievement of truly effective ways of communicating emotions, generating psychological interplay and, by extension, displaying a transpersonal 'aura' towards the accumulation of socio-cultural 'assets' via the interaction between persons and avatars, behind which, one has learnt through Velleman, there must be a 'real' mind in control in some corner of the actual world.

Within the SL conventional *ethos*, social and cultural capitals are valuable assets in the form of prestige, charisma, opinion making and influence on other avatars. These assets are 'traits' culturally constructed, defined (and traded) within SL, which, it is useful to remember, is not a conventional virtual game, but a virtual social environment. In this sense they also represent epistemological *archetypes* of virtual existence that, in order to

be *negotiable* and functionally operative in the exchange of *aesthetic* experiences, must be shown, made visible or, to use one of Cramer's terms, *made flesh* (virtually indeed).

As Gazira would recognise, the revealing aspect here is that these patterns rely, first of all, on the manifestation of a narrative language: *code*, which by its nature bears a double referent. The first is *textual*, which indeed possesses its own *visuality* not directly addressed here. The second is *iconographic*, which is visible through numerous image incarnations generated by the (original) data-file that brings them to existence in the form of avatar gestures, body-positions, movements and 'attitudes'. The traditionally assumed 'opposing' nature between the textual and the iconographic is apparent. This speaks of entities (like Gazira's virtual art) that result from programmed commands, coded instructions and de-inscriptions of scripts, 'written' to provide *flesh* and *gesture*. This fulfills the image and animation data-set that an avatar enhances throughout his/her virtual existence.

Regarding the 'human dimension' and using Gazira's exemplary artwork, it is possible to approach these aspects in a synthesised way via avatar gestural communication. In this respect, Gazira's eloquent comment made during an interview with *Lacan*, my avatar, is poignant:

LG: Would you be interested in defining terms like Code-Art, Code-Aesthetics, Art and Programming, and so on?

GB: Yes, of course. But LSL code is really peculiar.

The program execution can physically affect the perceive [sic] of the world and its residents.

Suspension of disbelief + an unknown-physical-perceived-variable.

Talking aesthetically, I found all of that pretty new.

Here, I think it is important to take a closer look at the idea of "program execution". It becomes clear that Gazira has created a whole method of aesthetic reflection, most notoriously when presenting *Acting As Aliens* at the Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana (2009). The executability of code as Cramer has demonstrated in his book, is an operation

that inevitably culturalises the object submitted to the influx of live action through ‘language’, which is the ‘magic’ behind code design.

From a mixed point of view anchored momentarily in semiotics, one may say that code programming becomes a triple *fulcrum* for enunciation: first, as a *point* in space (in abstract terms) from which it is possible to attest to and verify the power of unstable and flickering streams of raw data. Second, by this latter it is feasible to acquire temporary and differential states of configuration, folding and unfolding into other entities of meaning. And third, the fixicity of which (meaning) bounces from the spatial patterning to the temporalised one, as already mentioned by Munster (179).

In other words, Gazira ‘executes’ her code-performances with a certain amount of advance knowledge about where, and how the ‘eye’ of the avatar will reflect the stupor and awe attesting to the intrinsic nature of the boundaries between corporeal bodies and virtual ones, which one ‘uses’ as prosthetic extensions of our subjectivity, as explained in Chapter 2 on the Mattes (following D’Aloia).

I have been able to trace a vector from Gazira’s aesthetics to a plausible identification within neo-baroque indicators by examining *execution* as a process founded on language’s seminal structures (code). This code, as it were, has the power to turn the quotidian virtual object and its actions in SL into *culturalised* goods, as Gerosa and Ndaliansis have already pointed to. Gazira Babeli has said about another art piece, *Anna Magnani* (2007), that “in a virtual world, even a smile is encoded. In Second Life, to perform a gesture or make an expression you have to open your inventory and run the script in question” (Quaranta 2011 34).

In the above ‘scripted performance’, all avatars that touched a certain object triggered a script (written by Gazira) that ‘forced’ them to randomly perform, *one after another*, all the scripted gestures contained in their inventory. As one may see, a *relational process* from the intra-to-interpersonal subjectivity is another ontology of art for Gazira Babeli: for her, scripted narratives and code are instructions that “act” on the spot, therefore these are no less than “performances” (Quaranta 2011 48).

Working in this manner, Gazira has first verified and then, during her time in SL, rearranged the essential nature of code: from “scripted narratives” present in an avatar’s quotidian existence to performances, other forms of art, and especially *machinima* pieces where their power remains latent until the right time comes, such as an avatar touching a scripted object. In this respect, *Gaz of the Desert* (2007) is paradigmatic. Gazira has manifested on various occasions that: “Codes are just instructions, imperative verbs ... The result could be spectacular and/or create social troubles. I found it easier to call these instructions ‘performances’ or ‘actions’” (Quaranta 2011 47).

One feature may demonstrate the power of this procedure when one assumes code as an active element in the construction of *instructed* (scripted) narratives. As already mentioned before, the majority of Gazira’s work has taken place in non-dedicated settings in SL, which means that before exhibiting them these pieces have been somehow prearranged (calculated) to get the maximum impact with minimum effort—a verification of the power of scripts to modify, model and influx *life* as folding-unfolding actions upon the artificial or synthetic. The piece *Avatar on Canvas* (2007) is a good example of this tendency and attests to the intellectual and aesthetic *zeitgeist* of Gazira’s creativity: “The first use of the avatar-stretching script code *Deforma* was at a performance of *Second Front*, where members of a theatre audience were unexpectedly subjected to the effects of ‘scripted chairs’ mixed in with the normal ones” (Quaranta 2011 47).

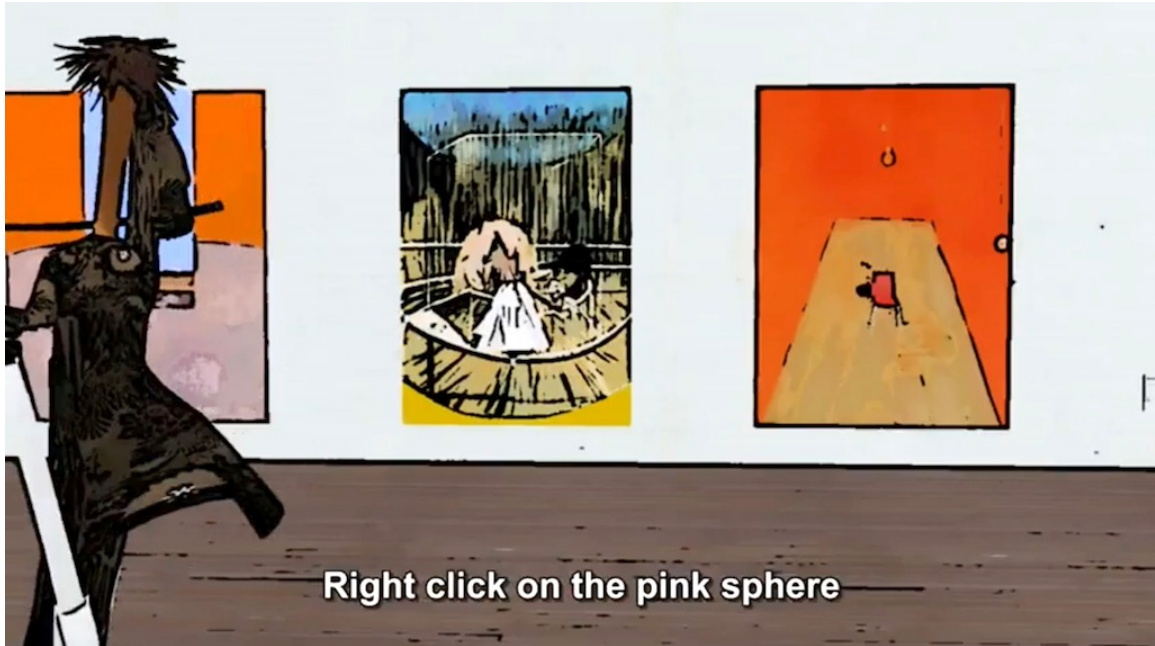


Figure 11: Scenes from Berardo Carboni's *Vola Vola* seen in Gazira Babeli's Gallery

(Personal Screenshot from YouTube

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbroeNoRfRk&feature=share&list=PLA570DABFA0209610>>)

This ontology is applied as tactical aesthetic procedures and I propose they are aesthetically connected with baroque and neo baroque epistemologies. These are also strategies, ways of understanding the world in baroque terms because they are providing arsenals of adaptable aesthetic responses to dialogue, contesting and/or resisting the *hyper complexity* of the contemporary world, what Campanelli has expressed as “the violence of contemporary communication” media: the inhibition or exclusion of active and participative aesthetic paths from an individual’s subjectivity able “to unmask the strategies used by powerful elites” (13). This is particularly ‘touching’ if one takes into account the conditions in which *visibility* and *representation*, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, are experienced in virtual reality, computer games and virtual social environments such as SL.

In the end, I am convinced that the concepts presented in both Gazira's and the Mattes' work might be considered part of a "trans historical state", a continuous stream of baroque aesthetic *markers* present in SL as *cybrid* forms of virtual art and media entertainment that reflect "a dominant neo baroque logic" as pointed out by Ndalians (Bartlem 5).

3.3 Concluding Remarks

Avatars will cause the cosmetic industry's collapse.³⁸

An additional point in my examination is Gazira's aesthetic rationale behind *ALAs*: it is abundant in humour. Gazira's thematic tendencies and behaviour are consistently channelled via irony or dark humour. However oddly, I see this as a virtuous pathos that characterises her work in SL: Gazira has the smart habit of raising from the unconscious the fact that it is only our *illusion* that makes the virtual appear 'real', and vice versa, that the experience of the virtual through *representation* and *illusion* is as real as dreams, fantasies or illusions. The paradox resides in the premise that a seminal self-projecting process exists there, as if a scientific *alibi* is permanently there in our senses and mind, fatally perpetuating the belief in a binary split between worlds: real vs virtual, immaterial vs material, actual vs remote, at the deepest levels of our perceptual and affective notions. Though strange, Gazira's treatment and plasticity around this paradox is genius.

In fact, that tendency underlines (more or less permanently) the idea that your avatar, despite being able to connect you with the best of Gazira's art, is just part of the real; that 'your' avatar does not actually force you to abandon your actual body and enter the 'disembodied' whirl of the digital and the virtual; and that this latter does not impinge on your actual persona to escape from the 'real' just because the conditions of materiality and the 'tangible' are 'coded' in a different pattern (the meta-reality of coded narrative or language as Gazira affirms). As expressed 'in her own words' to Mario Savini in an interview in 2008:

³⁸ Gazira Babeli quoted in an interview by Savini.

Gazira Babeli might be a sort of Buster Keaton, where the things ‘outside’ become alive and interrogate you without too much courtesy ... In which all the peels of those bananas you have eaten come to look for your shoes’ steps. In which the wheels are looking for brush because they are tired of spinning in the void. I believe that an identity is always in real choices, in the acts and in the works, but in perception it becomes imaginary. The context and the language transfigure it. (Savini, my translation)

In my examination of *ALAs*, I found these to be enticing ideas around the body and the context and language transfigurations in *VWs*, which allowed me to trace my own ‘portrait’ of the artist and then, consequently, seek evidence through *Lacan*’s research to think of her as an “intellectual virus”, to borrow an expression of Gualdoni’s (2009).

Gualdoni describes Gazira in the following terms: “Gazira Babeli is an artist, a young and good looking woman ... [S]he is not the avatar of just any artist [in actual life] ... but a proper artist, true and ‘real’” (2009, my translation). Gazira is an artist who works and produces almost exclusively in *SL*, a personality that grants interviews and declarations as a practicing artist, presents performances and produces video works in *SL*. Gualdoni underlines that Gazira *does not use* the platform (*SL*) as an alternative plane to what one lives in *AL*; rather, the opposite is true. For Gualdoni, she lives and works there, “reasoning (and un-reasoning) about those codes and in those specific codes, acting critically in its context, with a clear thinking that remembers the first generation of net-art” (2009). One may attest to how intellectually complex, hilarious and yet ferocious Gazira can be: Gazira’s notorious purpose as an artist points to dismantling and overcoming the “mythologies and trivialities, the cliché of the genius and the vulgarity” in art and culture (Gualdoni 2009).

To me it is fascinating how Gazira systematically manages to celebrate, on the one hand, and on the other, mock seasoned *high-brow* (classic) perspectives on culture and the other. Gazira takes cultural ‘reflexes’ that dictate habitual one-way *readings* from the actual to the virtual, and manages to turn them around, demonstrating the extent to which her more relaxed, non-linear and humouristic approach to *cybrid* *SL* art and *liminality* are embedded in her own aesthetic stake. Gazira asks participants to use the Anna Magnani script, available on her website:

```

                                Anna Magnani LSL code
// =====
                                // Anna Magnani v1.2
                                // =====
                                // (cc) 2006 Gazira Babeli - gazirababeli.com
// =====
                                // This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
                                // Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License
                                // http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
// =====
                                //
                                // HOW TO: Drag/Copy/Add this script on a prim
                                //
list EXP = ["express_afraid","express_afraid_emote","express_anger",
           "express_anger_emote","express_bored","express_bored_emote",
           "express_cry","express_frown","express_laugh",
           "express_repulsed","express_sad","express_shrug",
           "express_surprise","express_wink","express_worry",
           "express_cry_emote","express_disdain","express_embarrassed_emote",
           "express_kiss","express_laugh_emote","express_open_mouth",
           "express_repulsed_emote","express_sad_emote","express_shrug_emote",
           "express_smile","express_surprise_emote","express_tongue_out",
           "express_toothsmile","express_wink_emote","express_worry_emote"];
                                integer expression;
                                integer i;
                                default
                                {
                                    state_entry()
                                    {
                                        llSetName("Anna Magnani");
                                        llSetObjectDesc("By Gazira Babeli");
llRequestPermissions(llGetOwner(), PERMISSION_TRIGGER_ANIMATION);
                                    }
                                    run_time_permissions(integer perm)
                                    {
if (PERMISSION_TRIGGER_ANIMATION & perm) llSetTimerEvent(.1);
                                    }
                                    timer()
                                    {
expression = llFloor(llFrاند(llGetListLength(EXP)));
llStartAnimation(llList2String(EXP, expression));
llSetTimerEvent(llFrاند(.9 - .09) + .09);
                                    }
                                    }

```

By using code and scripting as transformative data *agents* Gazira puts herself in a position to produce (and reproduce) a number of potentialities and transformations aesthetically crystallised in both the virtual object's reality and the avatar's behaviour. In many ways Gazira's use of code as a performing 'distributive' tool manifests an aesthetic standpoint in line with more critical views on global technology and software policy, the social and political implications of digital culture, and the media's typical 'mystification' of hyper connectivity. Gazira's art is inscribed in a collective contribution/distribution of alternative initiatives, resisting regulations that perpetuate the hierarchies and inequalities of corporate media with its massively spread and artificially presented socio-cultural symbols as trending or mainstream cultural topics both in social new media and virtual and games worlds.

In this sense, Gazira's interview with Savini stresses an important 'intimate' view around the issues of identity and subjectivity mediated by the virtual platform of SL. At one point Savini makes this remark to Gazira: "you have affirmed that 'the avatars will cause the cosmetic industry to collapse'. Can it be said that one is facing a process of migration similar to that staged by the industrial revolution?" Gazira's replies that

if the world would not be in great part 'imaginary', gods and marketing might never have existed. Digital information tends to spontaneously multiply this phenomenon. Three hundred thousand MP3 downloads do not render music immaterial (which it has always been), do not render immaterial even the supports (vinyls used to spin and hard-disks still do so). What really becomes immaterial is our awareness of being able to listen to all of them. Time. The joke is that the cosmetic industry is based on time not advancing. Time emigrates elsewhere. The migration you speak of is behind us, but we continue to see it 'in front' of us. (Savini, my translation)

What I see in Gazira's code-performances and avatar, space or behaviour transformation via the expropriation of interfacial control on the client side, confirms what Cramer denotes the inherent *constructed-cultural* functions of computer code. Significantly, Gazira's transformations evoke some kind of 'contagion' and *memetic* repetition. In a recent conversation with Patrick Lichty (via facebook's chat), we were commenting about his avatar's (Man Michinaga) collaboration with Gazira in *Avatar On Canvas*. Patrick mentioned a couple of aspects that, to me, reinforce the conceptual continuity

adverted by Gazira, one that I have also considered to be involved in the creative logic of *ALAs*:

GT: [Hi Patriick] ... I would like to ask you about two things: Any meaningful remark that *Man Michinaga* remembers about *Avatar on Canvas*? Any remarks about neo-baroque 'markers' used to approach SL (or virtual) art (as per Angela Ndalians, Vito Campanelli, etc)? Thank you so much in advance.

PL: *Avatar On Canvas* was very nice. It seemed wonderfully ironic that I was using an avatar of the artist *Ulay* to perform something we thought was a play on *Francis Bacon*.

GT: So, [in my view] with *Avatar on Canvas* there's a very complex setting of transversal subjectivities across worlds, isn't it?

PL: Yes, *Avatar on Canvas* has a very complex vectoral relation. And even more so since Gazira and I collaborated IRL under our own personae in real life before SL. Now, as far as Campanelli is concerned, I believe he has a valid opinion, although I am more in line with Conceptualism, FLUXUS or even New Media as performative art. [sic]

GT: Yep, I got your point ... to me [AoC] makes more intense the translatability of subjective strata, so to speak.

PL: Exactly, my relation to Gazira was very intertwined. She curated me when I was part of *The Yes Men* in a AL show, actually *RTMark*...

These fluctuating questions migrating from identity to flexible vector re-arrangements of subjectivity rely on Gazira's ideas about continuity between VW and RW, while the fold(ing), unfolding of personae as Lichty expresses mean they are also related to Gazira's net.art origins and her political-socio-aesthetic standpoint: your avatar's mind is probably your actual mind, and what displays its presence simultaneously in both worlds is a single mind represented by two bodies that can talk and interact with each other, unfolding and multiplying vector relations between subjectivity categories despite the culturalised tendency towards unitarian compartment of reason.

In other words, there are some influences in Gazira's SL pieces that reveal the importance she gives to the role of illusion and representation, while at the same time sustaining the idea of continuity between the virtual and the real. This implies a shift in her virtual world ontology. On the one hand Gazira's works contain and release the message that there is no such split between *virtual* and *real* worlds, nor is hers a techno-

centric view revolving around theories of new media art as inevitably dominant (celebrating exclusively cutting-edge technological auto-referentiality). On the other, her goals and the *modes* of achievement she uses are certainly in a different *locus* of enunciation: that is, her message and aesthetic goals work successfully precisely because of the *liminal* exchange between the real and the virtual. This dynamic is the signal that the quotidian conditions in which today's digital aesthetics and network technology operate, propel the reorganisation of our own compositions and arrangements around (new) media and the virtual. This is Gazira's diagnostic of the state of art and creativity interacting with today's digital information, technology, culture and new media.

3.4 Links and SLURLs

Gazira Babeli's Website

<http://www.gazirababeli.com/index.php>

Second Front blogspot

<http://thesecondfront.blogspot.ca/2009/11/acting-as-aliens.html>

Acting as Aliens YouTube clip

<http://youtu.be/yuUzG1mQVko>

Galería Kapelica

http://www.kapelica.org/index_en.html#event=411

Vola Vola by Berardo Carboni (YouTube excerpts)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbroeNoRfRk&feature=share&list=PLA570DABFA0209610>

Chapter 4

4 Bryn Oh – Overview

This Chapter on Bryn Oh begins with the description of my SL avatar Lacan Galicia's encounters with her œuvre. Lacan's first experiences were of rapture, seduction and expansion of visual and emotive memories: images unfold that are blended with cinema, writing and semiotics.

These experiences are threaded to three elements bearing resemblance: Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1985) and *Invisible Cities* (1972); Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow Up* (1966); and a conference by Jacques Rancière, "The Future of the Image" (2002). Although these may appear unrelated to this chapter, my analogy will unveil conjectures around Bryn Oh's aesthetic ontologies, including *visibility*, *imagination* (as narrative and poetic dimension) and *telepresence*. At the end of Section 1, Lacan relates these to *machinima* and SL artworks produced by Bryn at *Immersiva* between 2009-12, showing the relevance of the comparison.

In Section 2 of the Chapter, both *Immersiva* and Bryn's œuvre are examined in relation to theses borrowed from Rancière's conference in particular, as well as other theoretical remarks on *machinic aesthetics*, subjective technologies and the role of the *ideal gaze*. I propose that the artist's *modus operandi* can be compared to an *opseoscopic* and semiotic device put in action by Bryn's knowledge of composition, as well as her domination of code and computerised animation skills.

The Chapter ends with Concluding Remarks and an outline of the main themes for a deeper reflection in the general Conclusions of this dissertation.

4.1 Section 1: Bryn Oh

4.1.1 Remembrance of Visibility, Imagination and Narrative

First of all, there is the community between 'signs' and 'us': signs are endowed with a presence and a familiarity that makes them more than tools at our disposal

or a text subject to our decoding; they are inhabitants of our world, characters that make up a world for us.³⁹

In September of 2009, my avatar Lacan Galicia came across, quite by accident, a video clip of *The Daughter of Gears* (TDG)⁴⁰. This is a story of a sick girl whose soul, mind and essence has been transferred by her mother to a robot girl. Narrated offline by Bryn Oh, one sees some abandoned robots and Bryn Oh, as the protagonist, involved in the task of climbing a tower to reach the girl, the daughter of gears.



**Figure 12: Bryn Oh, Immersed with Bryn (Second Life Machinima), 2009
(Personal Screenshot from YouTube <<http://youtu.be/1L3gNjU-Yek>>)**

TDG is the first part of a narrative trilogy, the second one being *Rabbicorn*, the melancholic saga of a robot in search of love and belonging, and the third *Standby*, the final chapter of the Rabbicorn story (the full story and details can be read on Oh's

³⁹ Rancière 35.

⁴⁰ See this clip at Bryn Oh's Blip channel: <http://blip.tv/bryn-oh/the-daughter-of-gears-2354324>

blogspot at <http://brynoh.blogspot.ca/2010/09/rabbicorn-story-part-one-daughter-of.html>). In this place there is a tower “called the *Daughter of Gears* and tells a story in poems as you climb it” wrote Bryn on her blogspot (Oh 2011 Archive). From this point on, one is in a position to intuit other parts as the narrative progresses. TDG at Blip (the online video channel) is the *machinima* version of a work realised in SL. In the video one can easily identify Bryn’s aesthetic taste, her recurrent plots and characters, and general thematic interests developed in *Immersiva*.

In this Chapter, Lacan proposes using this enigmatic ‘climbing the tower’—which challenges your avatar through narratives and dialogue along the way—as a metaphor for Bryn’s overall aesthetics and *modus operandi*. As well, the metaphor serves to illustrate much of her oneiric characters and the features of her work. In this sense, the climbing steps would be those ‘signs’ alluded to by Rancière in the quote above, under the title of this section.

Lacan’s first impression, corroborated by the video clip of the TDG, was a bitter sweet gothic delight: a multimedia narration occurring in a virtual space blending animation, music, poetry and 3D spatial designs, delicately and minutely elaborated by Bryn Oh—an artist born expressly as an SL avatar working in an online network context. In a comment on her blogspot in October 2008, Bryn affirmed:

So I am fascinated with the idea of being an Artist that exists only on the Internet. No real life connection just an artist made up of pixels and doodads wandering about. I have limited almost everything I can that will influence people. ... I have no voice, no real life picture, no age nothing that people will connect to the real world when they see me in world. Some kind of entity that creates art and is an extension of her art as well. I don't just make art and then have some shabby avatar that I have put no effort into ... the whole idea is to create a “character”, to design myself and be part of the art I create. (Oh 2008 Thinking)

Days later, while searching for some information about Gazira Babeli, Lacan found a ‘magical’ link to Bryn Oh’s work: a record in which Gazira mentions she had attended

one of Bryn's first presentations at Uqbar Arena.⁴¹ Gazira's remarks on Bryn's work were positive so my avatar took a quick mental note of the name: Bryn Oh, an artist's avatar that exists only on the Internet. Almost concurrently, I (not Lacan) came across a link to Bryn's blogpost⁴² courtesy of someone commenting on Lacan's own blog.

Once having been told that Gazira Babeli had come to Uqbar to see her work, Bryn's excitement was justified due to Gazira's prestige: "I was given a landmark by my friend Luce Laval to see Gazira's work. It was a great build of a tap spewing a multitude of objects ranging from cows to star wars cars." (Oh 2008 Days). Bryn's excitement is important to keep in mind because at that time her career in SL was only associated with *machinima*: cinematic, film, scripted and animated graphics, including various levels of interaction created with the tools, the environment's features and para-oneiric conditions characteristic of VWs, SL, and MMORPGs (massive, multiplayer online role play games). Flying, floating, teletransporting yourself (and others, when invited to do so), manipulating the view point, daytime light, space and camera-position, as well as rotating, are among the lexicon used by Bryn Oh in both her 3D and *machinima* creations. As pointed out in other parts of this thesis, *machinima* is an exclusive virtual form of cinematic art that belongs to VWs. Perhaps the exclusive character can be discussed from the context in which Bryn's artwork became naturally channelled: the multimedia diffusion of her work on consolidated video and photographic websites such as Bryn's Blip, YouTube and Flickr channels.

In other words, Bryn's inventions run from oneiric, magical and fantastic 3D places that are created with a trajectory or spatial navigation in mind, including characters, scripted animations and interactivity. All of these are enclosed in a mobile gaze that is *made flesh* in the *metaverse*, following Bryn's obsession with perfect visual-composition, a core component of her background as a classically trained painter with superb computer animation skills. The translation and blending of such skills into her SL sites, *machinima*

⁴¹ An Italian SIM devoted to SL art at <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Experience%20Italy%20NW/128/128/37>.

⁴² <http://brynoh.blogspot.ca/>

and photography is seamless and impeccably achieved, and it can be easily attested to at online outlets already mentioned.

4.1.2 From the *Daughter of Gears* to *Immersiva*, Bryn Oh's Persona and Her SL Artwork

What constitutes Bryn's visual (and cinematic) aesthetics is embedded in her SL *modus operandi*, which, as I will demonstrate in this Chapter, merges *narrative*, *imagination* and *visibility* as its dynamic components. It is also necessary to say that Bryn's work does not aspire totally or exclusively to the *machinima* label, but—notably—there is almost a permanent cinematic component of this nature present in her fantastic virtual architectures, landscapes, stories and performing characters. In other words, sooner or later a visual-kinetic component of exquisitely complex *machinima* examples unfolds prior to, concurrently, or supplementary to those fantastic virtual places and dream-like sites where everything has been minutely imagined, animated, coded, planned and brought to life by Bryn Oh.

Below is a list of her most salient virtual aesthetic *vectors*—to borrow Lichty's term⁴³—that I see as the most characteristic of her art in *Immersiva*, emphasising what is inherent to Bryn's *modus operandi*, such as her aim for blending, interacting, and starting a dialogue with the audience (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Immersiva/28/127/21>):

Narrative and story-telling power

Minutely spatial and perfect composition of visual planes and three-dimensional spaces

Cinematic-contextualisation of meanings (usually through multimedia techniques)

3D character design, objects, sculptures and 'architecture'

⁴³ Patrick Lichty applies the term *vector* to describe directions to which representational components of an aesthetic discourse in the virtual (a SL based artwork, for example) are pointing. Lichty actually speaks of 'directionality' under the thesis of *transmediation* (transliteration) defined by him as "the act or product of transliterating, or of expressing words of a language by means of the characters of another alphabet." Thus, by virtual he means "translation of embodiment and representation between mediums." (Lichty 2009 Translation 6).

Impossible in real-life affective or ‘emotional’ machines

Minutely encrypted interactions (hints, clues, hidden spots and interactive objects, ‘driving’ your avatar’s attention and actions)

Computer and graphic animation skills

At Bryn’s blogspot there is a full and lengthy retrospective of her *machinima* production, whether they were presented first as such, or recorded live in SL and then translated to *machinima* for distribution to the public (brynoh.blogspot.com). Here, one can get a panoramic view of Bryn Oh’s SL artwork since 2007, as all the details and links to her work are available at her official website and blogspot provided in the bibliography of this thesis. Below is Lacan’s selected list of Bryn’s *machinima*, those that are particularly eloquent in context of the ideas discussed further in this Chapter. Bryn Oh also has a Blip channel in which the full list of her *machinima* works is available (<http://blip.tv/bryn-oh>).

- 2012 *The Path*. A collective composition of nine artists given a random order. After creating a short narrative each artist would pass it on to the next in the sequence. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maMKeg2OJF0>)
- 2011 *Cerulean*. Cerulean is a side story within an exquisite corpse build done in Second Life. The larger build is called *The Path* and is a collaboration between Bryn Oh, Colin Fizgig, Marcus Inkpen, Desdemona Enfield/Douglas Story, Maya Paris, Claudia222 Jewell, Scottius Polke and Rose Borchovski. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhIKEak5p3Q>)
- 2011 *Anna's Many Murders*. Anna was a quiet girl, who through eyelashes watched the world. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9L7ck6fQB4>)
- 2011 *BOX*. A build based on creating a space for the visitors to be a part of and interact with the art work. The music for the build is structured with sound clips contained within randomly-timed players, meaning the overall ambient song is never the same. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCVM7aRwHXw>)
- 2009-10 *Rusted Gears*. “A poem really just about watching someone go.” Winner of the Peter Greenaway prize at UWA. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3t2FQpNY0ck>)
- 2010 *Dreams*. A build for a Peter Greenaway project called *Big Bang*. Music is by Soleil. Machinima and build by Bryn Oh. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVhkVVEDpk>)

- 2010 *Format*. A poem from Immersiva “And I write you poems...in garamond font.” (<http://blip.tv/bryn-oh/format-3979356>)
- 2010 *Catching Friends*. World Expo build by Marcus Inkpen. Machinima by Bryn Oh.
- 2010 *Lady Carmagnole*. Lady Carmagnole is a character from Bryn’s sim Immersiva on SL.
- 2010 *The Rabbicorn*. This is a build done in Second Life and sponsored by IBM.
- 2008-09 *The Daughter of Gears*. This is an addition to the Rabbicorn story at IBM 3 found inside the TV set on the tower. (<http://www.brynoh.blogspot.com>)
- 2009 *Immersiva*. Just a machinima of Immersiva. (<http://www.brynoh.blogspot.com>)
- 2008 *Ferrisquito at Immersiva*. The sim is an abandoned robot theme park. (<http://www.brynoh.blogspot.com>)

It is also worth mentioning that Bryn has created work not just at *Immersiva* but in other virtual sites in SL, commissioned by corporations like IBM and LEA⁴⁴ (Linden Endowment for the Arts, of which she recently became chair), or in collaboration with other SL artists on important works like *The Path* (of which I will speak later) and her contribution to film director Peter Greenaway’s multimedia performance *Big Bang* (2010).

Bryn’s œuvre merges subjects, strategies and techniques in new arrangements of visual and poli sensorial stimuli that coalesces in an original interactive virtual form of art made of 3D animation, poetry, code, music and *machinima*: a sort of enigmatic SL fantasyland and mysterious multimedia narrative, occurring in the metaverse. Differently put: Bryn’s work unfolds a systematic intent to apply her aesthetic and axiological standings about what virtual existence is and what purpose it serves. This begs the examination of her narratives, cultural objects and personae beginning with the fact that Bryn Oh is a name

⁴⁴ Linden’s Endowment for the Arts is an initiative of Linden Labs (owners responsible for the operation of SL) launched in 2010 around the art and artist’s community within SL. Its main objective is to provide virtual artists with the space, logistics, links, human resources and tools to further develop their creativity. LEA currently offers several artistic project grants, and organises structures for dialogue with and link to the art community, as well as the School of Visual Arts within SL. Bryn Oh became chair of the current presidential staff in 2011.

referring exclusively to an avatar that creates as an interactive virtual artist (i.e. she is a self-defined media artist existing only in the metaverse). The real person behind the avatar remains anonymous. In the following pages I will explain why anonymity plays a major role in her aesthetic and epistemological approach to SL.

4.1.3 “Subjectivity Is the Outcome of Anonymity” (Bryn Oh)

It is important to reiterate that Bryn’s work first became known to the public through video, photography and animation, and was initially conceived as ‘real’ 3D virtual places, sculptures and orchestrated scenarios, the interaction with which was unfolded through scripting. Most of them came to ‘existence’ in an SL place that could not have had a better name than *Immersiva*. If the diffusion of her work mainly occurred via networked social channels (videos, blogs and photography) and to a lesser degree through direct interaction in SL, this, to me, shows Bryn’s thoughtful and successfully constructed (yet subtle) media personality. This is a factor that I approached in each of the case studies in this thesis, according to SL artists’ goals, motivations and aesthetic orientation.

In this sense, Bryn’s awareness of the need for a digital media and online presence is reflected in the deep and attentive eye she casts on every detail, much *à la* ‘media studies gaze’. Through a diversity of online media, Bryn remains committed to the semiotic, formal and visual style that plays an important aesthetic role in her work. Hence her professional background as a painter and contemporary visual artist (from Toronto), intensively trained in design, computer animation, and oil painting surfaces virtuously.

On the other hand, precisely because of the massive audiovisual diffusion of her work through social network channels, it is not rare to read or hear about her art ‘confined’ exclusively to *machinima*. Many viewers and fans refer to Bryn as the *machinima* queen. In part, this is due to the double function of the computer as the creation-distribution ‘channel’ on the one hand, and also the ‘place’ of consumption of her work, on the other, through the same networks, using the computer’s screen as its main mediator. So I want to be emphatic in that my commitment has been to explore and explain, from the perspective of my theoretical framework, the most salient components (many of them

present in her *machinima* pieces) of Bryn Oh's creative process with which her subjectivity unfolds and turns into a shared experience.

In other words, I am much more concerned with the epistemological, heuristic and ontological dimensions of her work (her plasticity and *mythopoeia*), than the purely formalistic, technical (like computer coding), or cinematic ones. That is to say, during the recompilation of evidence, cultural objects, records of virtual experiences with her SL art, visual, bibliographic and theoretical sources, I have not dwelled much on iconographic, stylistic or techno-digital characteristics of her methods in SL, or even her scripting, video and film postproduction and interface resources (which are indeed vast and worthy of analysis). Rather, what I have examined in detail (to be presented in the second section of this Chapter) are the affective, semiotic, visual, narrative and rhetoric processes that, in my view, characterise Bryn's *ideal gaze*.

The idea of an *ideal gaze* is a hypothesis from a relevant multilevel perspective, based on a perspective from my own experience as a media and visual artist, as well as media studies researcher. Of these, I would like to mention in particular two theses around the complex relationship between contemporary technologies, digital image, and attention-seeking paths for the audience. Campanelli has critically examined these two theses in his corner-stone book called *Web Aesthetics*: the first one is Eric Kluitenberg's "aesthetics of the unspectacular", and the second is "Gert Lovink's thesis of *technologies of the self*" (Campanelli 173).

In the first case, Campanelli paraphrases the Dutch theorist Kluitenberg, who thinks—contrary to Debord's paradigm in *The Society of Spectacle*—that images circulating online "relayed by millions of webcams are intrinsically unspectacular" and that these images, "though reclaiming their right to exist no longer require the attention of the masses" (Kluitenberg quoted in Campanelli 173). At the time of my examination of Bryn's oeuvre, this suggestive idea seemed to provide valid explanations for a number of Bryn's counterintuitive artistic decisions. For instance, her 'secret texts' upon which other images depend to unfold, simply remain *blind* in *Immersiva* and other SL venues, existing independently of the need to be seen, while at the same time retaining their

potential to unfold and create further interactions and narratives. The possible sequences and their randomness actually constitute the unspectacular plasticity encouraged by Bryn, a way to coyly negotiate the audience's attention through something Lacan calls a combined media-personality 'check-list'. This includes Bryn's flickr photos, YouTube and Blip *machinima* video lists, as well as blog entries that speak to each other and work *ensemble* to accompany her SL-based art productions (before, during and/or after). She accomplishes all of these by the use of Linden Scripting Language techniques and affective plastic and narrative strategies.

In the second case, with such strategies Bryn takes advantage of the accumulated effect in today's digital times of what theorist Lovink has called *technologies of the self*. For the purpose of maximum clarity with this idea, allow me to quote in full Campanelli's remark of Lovink's term:

we can state that the images populating blogs, photo albums and social networks are soliloquies: expressions that do not require any form of dialogue, for their only *raison d'être* is to exist in some corner of the ocean of digital communications. As Lovink notes in *Zero Comments*, new media allow anyone to speak, but they degrade our ability to listen. For Lovink, it is precisely the awareness that one is talking to oneself that throws bloggers into nihilism. Blogs, meanwhile, erase the need for confrontation with *the Other* and become *technologies of the self*. It is my view [Campanelli's] that such expressions are a means of convincing oneself of the reality and authenticity of our own lived experience. (173)

I will develop now, from this perspective, a connection of Lacan's experiences and observations about the convincing reality of 'his' own mediated experiences as 'user', co-author and inter-actant of Bryn's art, whether in SL or *machinima*. I have used an analogical method to create a richer discussion in terms of *visibility*, image in motion, *fantasy* and *telepresence* with the aim of unveiling *techniques for observing the gaze*—what I have called *opseoscopic* strategies, or the creation of *opseoscopic*⁴⁵ devices, employed by Bryn's SL aesthetic contribution.

⁴⁵ Peter Weibel quoted in Chapter 1: they "taught us to see differently with the aid of machines, revealing a world of images that could not be created and displayed without them. They created a writing of 'vision',

To be clear about the concept *ideal gaze*, this might not be assumed in a literal or taxonomical way. What in rigour I call Bryn's *ideal gaze* is a notorious tendency in her work to seek to blend the ways of seeing and of telling about it (a prerogative most artists have that can transform them into the first witness and 'public' of their art) through narratives that are incorporated through the entirety of her creative endeavour, but on an apparent 'secondary' (hidden) level. In other words, Bryn's *modus operandi* works as a non-linear, multidisciplinary unfolding of narrative-making patterns that I will outline in the next pages, focusing not on this or that exemplary artwork, but on Bryn's SL method of inter-media blending on the virtual island of *Immersiva*.

I will now present other concatenating ideas that help to define the basic articulation of Bryn's visual, cinematic narrative (poetic) and interactive elements (scripted). In broad strokes, building an *ideal gaze* through unfolding *opseoscopic* strategies is what turns Bryn's art into an almost perfect example of SL's *neobaroque* lineage, embodying the quintessential possibilities of SL as the preferred platform to sustain and reconcile the interstitial and continuum dialogue of *illusion*, *representation* and *telepresence*.

It seems to me that the techno-cultural importance of an affective-computerised 'device' of such nature and complexity for artists working in the metaverse or, more generally, in synthetic interactive digital landscapes, cannot be evaded. What I specifically mean by *neobaroque lineage* is not a ranking degree or taxonomical label imposed to a determined virtual art practice; on the contrary, this is an age-old process in visual arts (mainly) that, in Bryn's case, is manifested in the unfolding aesthetic paths emerging from game and mass-culture in the current electronic virtual art contexts to which her work belongs.

opseography, instead of a writing of movement (film), they observed vision, developed the techniques to 'see' vision, opseoscopy" (53, my translation)



Figure 13: Bryn Oh, The Rabbicorn Revisited

(Personal Screenshot from Second Life) *The Rabbicorn Story* can be viewed on BlipTV <<http://blip.tv/bryn-oh/the-rabbicorn-story-by-bryn-oh-3125944>>

Chapters on the Mattes and Gazira Babeli demonstrate this same trend connecting to the core of a reversible process of representation has already been noted, in which dynamically (Munster would say ‘flickering’) subjectivity and identity abandon any nominal fixity, becoming unstable, and entering into a transforming dynamic loop of multiple enunciative modes of being, and, most importantly, of being represented in *the*

virtual. Lichty would call it a *transmedial* (transliterate) mode of becoming a ‘self’ in the virtual (Lichty 2009 Translation 5).

These shifts in subjectivity and identity are not superficial or formalistic; on the contrary and particularly in SL, work like Bryn’s demonstrates that it is bound to build a very personal idea about *visibility*, a form of *meta-visibility* achieved by systematic control of SL tools and visual, script and multimedia resources. This represents a profound knowledge of the transmedial ‘modes’ in which imagination, cinematics and, most notably, the blending of collective popular imagery from cartoons, sci-fi and multimedia animation with online games and literature (from hypertext and virtual interaction, to telepresence and bio art) are assumed by Bryn Oh as current forms of visual and textual poetry.

4.2 Section 2: An Analogical Examination of *Immersiva*

4.2.1 *Immersiva* Fulfilled its Ephemeral Fate

Immersiva is not a single (or select) artwork by Bryn Oh, but rather the name of the SIM (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Immersiva/28/127/21>) in which the artist created many different projects and virtual aesthetic exchanges. Bryn was sponsored by Dusan Writer⁴⁶ in 2009 to continue building in SL, as he wrote in the July 2009 entry of his blog:

I’m really thrilled to sponsor Bryn Oh’s *Immersiva*. Her work is stunning, and her most recent show at IBM brings her even closer to the goal of creating a completely immersive experience with story and 3D content. (Thompson)

Bryn soon populated the site with a range of 3D buildings and stories, ranging from melancholic and exquisite fantasy spaces and robots, to interactive visual poems, accompanied by a number of *machinima* pieces since then.

⁴⁶ Dough Thompson is CEO of AOBI (Academy of Bright Ideas): “design thinking, incubator, idea agents. Partner: Startled Cat, studio for immersive storytelling,” Toronto. Dusan Writer is his blogger name at *Dusan Writer’s Metaverse* (<http://dusanwriter.com/>).



**Figure 14: Bryn Oh, Irrevocably, an Early Concept for *The Daughter of Gears*, 2009
(Personal Screenshot from BlipTV <<http://blip.tv/bryn-oh/irrevocably-2735066>>)**

Immersiva, sponsored by *Dusan Writer*, ceased to exist unexpectedly in January 2012. The story, along with reflections and other gossip around this sudden change of status can be found on Bryn's blog.

From this, I will, however, mention a few aspects that are notable in light of my examination of *Immersiva*. First, Bryn and *Madpea* (a collective of SL artists oriented to a certain kind of games led by Kiana Writer) wrote a petition to LEA in order to ask

Linden Labs to provide both of us our regions at no cost for a year's duration to continue our work here in Second Life which benefits both of us as creators and Linden Labs who will benefit from high caliber content created for its users. After a one year duration the opportunity to be considered for ongoing support upon review of our achievements over the supported period. It is our hope that Linden Labs will recognize our contribution to the health of Second Life and will see this proposal as an investment in its own future. (Oh and Kiana Writer 2012)

Second, the subsequent negative response of LL in an effort to channel and concentrate initiatives such as this one through LEA's latest policy and mandate. Dusan Writer has sustained the opinion that, whether he liked it or not, LL's decision was fair and sends a clear message to artists within SL. Currently, Bryn is chair of LEA and promissory projects as well as political and organisational decisions are under way. To remain abreast of updates, please refer to both Bryn and Dusan Writer's blogs.

4.2.1.1 "Lifting Up a Rock to See What Lives Underneath" (Bryn Oh)

If one looks closely to works such as *The Path* (2011) (a collective artwork by SL artists) and *Dreams* (Bryn's set design and *machinima* collaboration for film director Peter Greenaway's project *Big Bang*, a transmedial performance blending live action, choreography, film and *machinima* from 2010), one notes she has ventured into many and varied processes of creation, in search of a particular way to perform as a visual creator from a second (virtual) body-existence. The vision she holds with regard to SL art and *machinima* was first manifested and developed at *Immersiva*. In *The Path*, one attests to a thread of different perspectives coming from nine SL artists who start their own creation exactly where the previous artist ended. The most salient aspect of this procedure is that Bryn has achieved the ability to connect a number of random 'strings' to a backbone plot, through specific rules of combination of points of view, visuals, music and rhythmic patterns, etc. In the case of *Dreams*⁴⁷, it was a set build with some *machinima* collaborating with Peter Greenaway's project *Big Bang*.

In her interview with Lacan, Bryn defines some of her 'keys' since the first times of *Immersiva*:

When I look at a virtual world (specifically second life) as a medium, it has far more depth to create immersion than my static 2D work. [In SL] I have access to ambient sound, which can subtly funnel ones mood into a specific direction. My winter storm [Bryn refers to one of her older oil paintings used before as a sample to illustrate immersive techniques in 2D] now has the ambience of blowing wind. I can script which is a type of programming. This opens quite a

⁴⁷ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nVhkVVEDpk&feature=player_embedded#!

few more doors but in relation to a winter storm it would allow me to add blowing snow particles or other forms of movement just to name a very few applications. (Oh 2011 Interview)

This is the *first vector* (out of three) from which I have approached Bryn's creations in SL from *Immersiva*: her superb, mature, and painterly method applied to *machinima*, the idiosyncratic form of SL or VW art. In a similar sense, when asked about her minutely and systematic obsession with the visual composition of the artwork, Bryn told Lacan something that ties in subjectivity formation (and therefore identity) to *anonymity*. This is, to me, Bryn's basic ontology around the idea of immersion:

My subjectivity is a direct result of my anonymity. One of the most unexpected and important elements to a virtual world is how its inhabitants connect to one another. For example, people fall in love in virtual worlds. They are not falling in love with another cartoon character; rather they fall in love with another mind. Our first life physical bodies take a back seat to our thoughts and words. Second Life as a medium excels in this area due to its level of immersion. (Oh 2011 Interview)

At surface level the process is rather simple: it consists of populating the space with paintings, poetry, rusted gears, evicted robots, levers, pulleys and buttons that once belonged to melancholic machines. Many times, these virtual 3D objects carry coded instructions with them so that, on a deeper level, the main purpose of those *affective* objects is to *focus* and retain the visitor's attention within an enclosed 360-degree perceptual system, emphasising in the process what theorist Lovink calls *technologies of the self* (Campanelli 173). I mentioned this term earlier and will return to it in more detail a bit later; the point for now is that Bryn, in this fashion, actually achieves the coalescence of a preferred *scenario* in which a variable yet calculated sequence of modified behaviour in the visiting avatar will take place.

In this way, both literal and metaphorical cross-narratives and oneiric visions emerge and combine, holding you, the visiting-avatar, via a number of virtual 'invisible' scenarios in which your *mission* is to first empathise with the space, and then find meaningful fragments or clues in the form of small pieces to move, mechanisms to trigger, or *petits mystères* to solve, which remain temporarily *blind* to your avatar. Imaginative hidden plots created by the artist that the visitor *must* discover and decipher in order to navigate,

step by step, to other levels of the œuvre is, in a semiotic sense, the equivalent of a preferred trajectory of the territory by threading its components together.

Of course, a visiting avatar is always free to navigate the space in her own way, at her desired degree of involvement; in fact, the number of ‘indifferent’ visitors that quickly abandon the site is not small. But as Lacan himself experienced, the true affective and aesthetic potential of Bryn’s SL-based art resides in the combination of a visual composition, *transliterated* to a multimedia scenario expressed by 3D spaces, characters to interact with, tasks to complete, and hidden small narratives to find, all calculated to unfold as long as the visitor is curious enough to pay attention. This requires curiosity and patience; for the unaware, impatient, or ‘sloppy’ visitor, *immersive* may look ambiguous, obscure and cumbersome. These interactions release the narrative potential contained in the site, tracing the path or preferred trajectory proposed by Bryn’s gaze. Due to this factor, one of Lacan’s first and important questions when interviewing her was, Who is your audience? Bryn’s answer is explicit:

My audiences are those who like to lift up a rock to see what lives under it. People with great curiosity and patience. I hide many elements to my work inside the surface. Both mentally and physically. For example, I may have a tiny word printed on the side of a work. If the viewer types that word in chat then the sculpture will ‘hear’ it and open up a hidden compartment. When the compartment opens the viewer will then be able to find new layers to contemplate. If that viewer doesn’t type the word in the first place then they will never discover other elements. (Oh 2011 Interview)

Lacan was fascinated by Bryn’s enclosed systems, challenging his curiosity and patience to discover other levels of interaction—needless to say, in AL I was also captivated. I experienced an unexpected counterintuitive reward: in return, Lacan had an enhanced, multi-faceted *feeling* of being embedded in the piece from a different angle, being narratively integrated in the *bliss* emanating from the place and its multiple stories as one of its characters.

This is the ‘effect’ that I will analogically relate to film and writing, connecting Lacan’s experience with my (his) memories of Italo Calvino’s writing and Michelangelo Antonioni’s films. The purpose of this analogy is to emphasise the similitude between

affective virtual *aesthetics* from writing, film and SL performances. Bryn's work causes *autoempathy* in *your* avatar's affective sphere, a feeling of day-dreaming within someone else's dream. This outcome created by the environment depends on being intellectually, perceptually and emotionally immersed in the place and plots.

This complex multimedia experience, at the level of aesthetic sharing, has already been explained earlier in this dissertation as an intellectual-sensorial compound or *deleuzian* 'bloc' of sensations (1987), which, according to Munster's digital aesthetics theory, consists of the rearrangement of a number of gauged stimuli interacting visually and semiotically, sorted in a synthetic realm by tele-present interactions. Characterising Bryn's aesthetics in this way is my *second vector*.

The components of Bryn's scenarios, then, emerge and provoke such rearrangement in a way that they create the impression (illusion) of new levels of relational and perceptual dialogue running along the artwork's plasticity and visual components, alternating the display and concealment of information. The fundament of this dialectic resides in the careful but prolific poetic and intellectual stimuli designed and programmed, step by step, by Bryn Oh. These are the artist's visual 'semiotic' strategies designed for the purpose of pleasing and capturing your eye first, and then secondly intensifying your sense of affective sharing in the piece. In short, this is the equivalent of providing your avatar (the interacting virtual audience) with the elements, motifs, and incentives to penetrate and inhabit the image, to dwell on its secrets and enhance the act of *dreaming* about it, to ultimately become part of it. À propos to these processes, Bryn commented that:

I believe we are at the fumble beginnings of a new art movement, one which will challenge our notion of reality and identity. It will be both the pinnacle of artistic creativity and also the newest form of addiction to supplant all others. ... For me it is an essential part. It is the placing of my internal reality into a virtual reality. Very few people know my 'first life' identity. My family and friends don't know about Bryn Oh and most are just vaguely aware I create virtual art. As a result I have a type of freedom to look at and express my internal reality in a pure form. (Oh 2011 Interview)

Immersion is cornerstone in Bryn's SL work from the perspective that it embodies special connotations that beg a detailed explanation, particularly in regards to her ideas about

visual and three-dimensional composition theory. Her painterly and iconological axiologies are, from an epistemological point of view, rather *classical* in the theoretical sense and yet highly hybridising and experimental in the practical, applied one. In October 2008 Bryn reflected on these issues:

The visual artist essentially has one main purpose. To make the viewer look at or interact with their creation for as long as possible. When the viewer has moved away then you may have lost them so essentially don't let them leave. A good artist will subtly employ different techniques to keep the eye of the viewer traveling within the piece ...

The eye tends to travel counter clockwise in a circular manner moving from focal point to focal point. The artist will then try to lead the eye to areas of importance. This can be done through colour theory, composition or a multitude of other methods ...

The artist wants to capture the viewer and suspend their disbelief. Make them feel like they are within the painting. ... This is where Second Life comes in. I believe the next big art movement will be immersive art, and I think second life is the start to this. ...

When space is available I create a story to catch the viewers attention. I create mysteries or environments for participation, and I am constantly trying to think of other ways to further immerse the viewer. (Oh 2008 Immersiva)

This sort of contrasting or paradoxical plasticity is my *third vector*: that is to say, the articulation of visual, coded and narrative (literary or poetic) affective components, used by Bryn as *opseoscopic* qualities and strategies in her oeuvre, transforming the image and immersive techniques in interlocutors to the visitant, to 'observe' her and their own gaze, a shared *own* visibility. So image and words, words of images, and images of words triggering reverse orders that, in this case, implicate three components used by Lacan to examine Bryn's work from a more tangible perspective, building on three principles of aesthetic nature most pertinent when speaking of *machinima*: *visibility*, *narrative* and *imagination*.

I claim that in Bryn's artwork these elements become *opseoscopic* devices because they are organised on two levels: the properly visual as a film director might do in RL, and the narrative level through the aggregated path of virtual world's *neobaroque lineage*, unfolding from combinatory paths, multimedia hyper structures, and the provision of a

visual *pentagram* for the purpose of merging narrative plots, image, music, poems, performance, motion and computer scripts into the viewer's experience and response. This is what I mean by Bryn's organic (limbic) relationship orchestrated between images, words, code and cinematics.

For the purpose of simplifying and, to some extent, illustrating my analogy, I am going to relate Bryn's detailed and educated sense of spatial composition, *opseoscopic* processes, and the ability to create metaphors, with other aesthetic markers that are meaningfully related to what any avatar can contemplate and participate in while visiting *Immersiva*, the SIM in which the artist has realised most of her SL work.

4.2.2 Seeing the Sayable, Saying the Visible, Hiding One and the Other

Unlike the other case studies in my thesis, with Bryn Oh I have come to the conclusion that what best reflects the artist's exemplary or personal aesthetics is the assemblage of her differentiated productions in which cinematic treatment, character and narrative creation, plots and code interaction have followed strictly Bryn's deep (almost obsessive) commitment to transform the visual plane of composition into a virtual *desire* machine when translated into three-dimensional micro universes from which unfolding narratives and oneiric visual poetics emanate.

This fascinating convergence based on the process of an 'ideal' gaze or trajectory for her work is the outcome and, at the same time, the *raison d'être* of the island of *Immersiva*. Her particular sensibility is similarly linked to *imagination*, *myth-making* and *visibility* in much the same way as Calvino, as one shall see. Consequently, I have referred to *Immersiva* as an arrangement of paths leading to Bryn's ontologies around these three, from my own understanding and aesthetic experiences with the Italian writer's literature. There is a sweet-sour spirit; a melancholic atmosphere and the intimate solitude or privacy that, at least to me, recalls 'old' CD-ROM based third-person games from the late nineties. I am thinking in particular of The Residents' *Freak Show* (1995) and American

McGee's Alice (2000)⁴⁸ I used to play and of which my master's thesis on visuality and new media received its inspiration.

In the next pages I will develop a few reflections and connections between Bryn's artwork, Italo Calvino's writing and a film by Michelangelo Antonioni (*Blow Up*). In this regard I will compare Bryn's ideas around how a visiting avatar becomes 'seduced', and his/her/its attention (yours) retained by perceptual techniques of immersion, to those used by Calvino and Antonioni. I will also use theories of the image and film from the previously-mentioned essay by Rancière, "The Future of the Image", presented at the Centre National de la Photographie in 2002, and later published with other essays in a book of the same name. My aim is to demonstrate how *visibility*, *narrative* and *imagination* are amalgamated in a plural functionality destined to share the artists' subjective gaze with her public.

4.2.3 Calvino's Desire Computer: *Immersiva* as Invisible City

In 1972, Calvino wrote what is probably his most acclaimed novel *Le città invisibili* (Invisible Cities). The work has been copiously studied by specialists and literary, urban, art and architecture critics—for them it represents a keystone between modern and postmodern times. Significant to mention from this book is Calvino's "humanist inquiry into the nature of the city itself" (Modena 1) as a prerequisite for a much-demanded social, urban, cultural and political renewal in western societies in the late sixties.

There is also an informed quest for an 'unconventional' idea of *utopia*, one in which the intellectual, emotional and existential aspirations and capabilities of the individual are not excluded at the expense of the more traditional and heavier demands of socially equalising *utopias*. From this proceeds Calvino's interest in urbanism, architecture, design and the city as a place condensing the most advanced patrimony of human

⁴⁸ The San Francisco based American Art collective best-known for performance, multimedia, and avant garde music, they were pioneers in exploring cd-rom and similar technologies (<http://www.residents.com/home/>). American McGee's Alice is an unauthorized sequel based on Lewis Carroll's character, third-person PC-Game, developed by Rogue Entertainment and published by EA games in year 2000 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_McGee's_Alice).

civilisation. *Invisible Cities* is reminiscent of the eighteenth century *The Travels of Marco Polo* by Rustichello da Pisa: in Calvino's version, Marco Polo entertains a melancholy and aged Kublai Khan (the emperor of the Mongols) dwelling quietly in his palace gardens, narrating tales and descriptions of fifty five 'cities' in Khan's dominion. Due to Khan's age, it is unlikely he could travel to all corners of his dominion, so Marco Polo assumes the task of 'visionary traveller':

Polo does not report on cities that he has actually visited but instead on *invisible cities*, or urban images seen in what Calvino called the 'inner city'—that is, on the screen of his imagination. ... Polo describes the cities of the empire in fifty-five brief, fanciful accounts, compelling the Khan to *visualize* and *interpret* his words. ... Their conversation conveys, under eleven distinct rubrics, the realities and the potentialities of the city as the maximum expression of human civilization: "Cities and Memory," "Cities and Desire," "Cities and signs," "Thin Cities," "Trading Cities," "Cities and Eyes," "Cities and Names," "Cities and the Dead". (Modena 2)

The interest that scholars specialised in image and word studies have dedicated to this novel is centralised in its *visuality*: an articulation between images (mental and real) and the word as a tool for imaginary narration. This is how I came to relate it to *Immersiva*. Modena particularly stresses Calvino's proclivity for visual and plastic arts, comic books and design, condensed in his rational and also intuitive proclivity and fascination for the transliterating method of *ekphrasis*. This latter is what I see reflected and applied in Bryn's creative method.

In the opening pages of Chapter 1, I spoke about Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*. There, Calvino presents, albeit twenty years before, what I think might be considered today's SL and *machinima* aesthetic principles: *lightness*, *visibility*, *quickness* and *multiplicity*. For Calvino, essential human behaviour is no other than creativity, which makes *dialogue* and negotiation possible between illusion, technology, and (tele)presence. Also, inspired in Thomas More's *Utopia*, there is the image as a metaphor for human 'technology', which makes that negotiation possible through fantasy and the proliferation of metaphors, narratives and images-in-action:

The effort to complete a classification [of the phenomena of utopia] in the series, which intersects in various ways so that all parts are in relation to each

other and in their totality give birth to a concluded system (the effort to explore the world with the help of cybernetics, which for Calvino was to become a real obsession), refers unequivocally to Charles Fourier and his *Theory of the Four Movements*. The frame structure incorporates, however, the narrative situation from Thomas More's *Utopia*. The sovereign of the Tartars, Kublai Khan, immobile and isolated in the gardens of his palace, interrogates the tireless narrator Marco Polo, and is a replica of Thomas More's figure who listens to the great traveller Raphael Hythlodæus in the garden of his inn in Antwerp, a *locus amoenus* [pleasant place] for an ideal communication. (Kuon 27-28, my translation)

I have come to an understanding of the concepts of *visibility*, *imagination* and *telepresence* in his narrative, and see them connected to Bryn's creativity in the following manner. There are two important aspects to extrapolate: first, an essential axiology in Calvino around the act of creation as *seminal visuality*, which has been commented on in the introduction of this thesis. Second, the idea of *utopia* as analytical mirror. This alludes to the Italian writer's habit of minutely examining his own work, revealing a *thread* of books, images, paintings and other forms of art deeply embedded in a subconscious *continuum*, the rearrangement of which eventually surfaces in the form of the author's 'own' ideas, always—affirms Calvino—departing from an image. Indeed I see resonances of the same 'spirit' in the way Bryn resolves much of her creative work.

Invisible Cities is considered by many as one of the precursors to the idea of *hypertext* as a generative web or art-structure and the *vision* of the city as a plurality of imaginary, fantastic places, even non-places. These serve Calvino's purpose of delineating, before our eyes, a persistent and personal idea of *utopia*, one in which the *individual* (a person or character, perhaps one could even say an *avatar*) moves within a plot that is sometimes located at the centre of an evolving discourse and sometimes not, in clear contrast to more traditionally oriented ideas around preferred *harmonising utopias*, the description and aesthetic implications of that narrative operation actually being a form of conversation occurring among characters (Kublai Khan and Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities*). As Calvino often declared, *harmonising utopias*, historically, are much more hostile to the individual than the collective; as if the personal, when developing its subjective 'vision of things', was irremediably adversary (or casually *blind*) to the social, grouped, and cultured.

In his essay “Critica e progetto dell’utopia: *Le città invisibili* di Italo Calvino” Italian-French literature professor Peter Kuon (University of Salzburg) makes the following affirmation:

His utopia of the aesthetic moment is based on individual experiences of happiness, which, as in Raissa for example, the ‘Sad City’, you can live every moment even in the most miserable circumstances but, when imagined as being linked together, make for a happy city, hidden, ephemeral, never again to be rebuilt within the city of unhappiness: “an invisible city” that, in its texture, is reminiscent of Augustine’s *civitas Dei*. Happiness in his personal dimension of communication, addressed by his fellow men, is a prerequisite in Calvino and not, as in traditional utopias more hostile to the subject, the result of the ideal community. (34, my translation, my emphasis)

From this perspective, Calvino outlines a seminal link between human capacity to create images, the sense of visibility, lightness, multiplicity and the way in which visibility threads and merges all of them via *ekphrasis* (a literary description of or commentary on a work of art) and imagination gains momentum (in this sense *Six Memos* would be the chronicle of the analytical description of this merging process into a utopian and universally valid aesthetic program). I am serious in thinking that Bryn’s work could be paired advantageously to Calvino’s aesthetics, particularly in the way *ekphrasis* works in Bryn’s art, manipulating the eye and the imagination, showing in this way similarities to Calvino, who openly accepted that he had given pre-eminence to image and *visibility* in his creations.

In María Antonieta García de la Torre’s essay “Los ovillos de Italo Calvino: El hipertexto como multiplicidad narrativa” (2005), one finds evidence of this. She affirms that:

The ties connecting stories are the essence of hypertext, only its interaction merges different characters in variable contexts as backdrops in a theatre. The reader’s participation is a neurologic part of this dynamic as it works as a partner in a *conversation*, rather than a passive recipient. This overlapping of narrative levels involving the characters, both the reader and the writer, implies the relativisation of levels of reality: what was once fictitious can now be more real than a piece of wood. (my translation, my emphasis)

In this sense, Bryn Oh appears to be an advanced Calvinian media disciple. I have intended to approach Bryn’s aesthetics from Calvinian *visibility*, *lightness* and *multiplicity* due to the similarities I find in both creative processes with regards to the mix

of narratives, the mythical and socially-interrogated role of technology, and the scripted *ekphratic* world of digital times.

4.2.4 Antonioni's Imaginary Visit to *Immersiva*: A Place to Reconstruct Meaning by Visuals and Vice Versa

In *Blow Up*, a 1966 film by Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, the main character is a posh British fashion photographer who also has aspirations as a 'serious' artist but bears no name and is played masterfully by David Hemmings. The film is based on the 1959 short story, *Las babas del diablo* (The Devil's Drool) by Argentinean writer Julio Cortazar. On a side note, it is worth noting that this was one of Calvino's favourite stories by Cortazar.

By chance at a park and without asking, the photographer take pictures of a couple of lovers, and the young woman (marvellously played by Vanessa Redgrave) argues with him after discovering the interruption in their privacy (<http://youtu.be/-ywa6qeYJAg>). During the scene and off camera, one perceives a sort of metallic sound, barely audible, and one then sees the woman running back over her steps looking around and soon 'disappearing'. Something strange has happened that the photographer (and we, the audience) cannot see. Later on, while developing the negative, a tiny detail grabs his attention: in the corner of the printed plate there is something he had not seen earlier. 'Blowing up' the zone many times reveals a blurry image of a hand holding a pointed gun; and, on further enlargement of another area of the image, what looks like the face and head of a man lying on the grass, or at least he gives the *illusion* of such an image represented in 'his' print.

Blow Up is a cult-movie, a master-piece in the fullest sense of an art film can be; conceived, shot and presented as an arrangement of visual narrative around a story whose central object is *visibility* as a web of other possible or impossible narratives. It is the saga of an unexpected discovery, revelation and reconstruction of meaning, centred on an image that everybody can see, but will remain *invisible* (at least on the surface) throughout the film, and whose several deeper levels point to a multidimensional narrative. Despite these fragments being photographs, their ultimate meaning and

symbolism cannot be anchored beyond an uncertain frontier between illusion and reality. In this way Antonioni introduces a vector of *liminality* in the film, which causes the protagonist to cross the boundaries between the *visible* and the *invisible*, the possible and the uncertain, over and over again and, along with him, we the public in the theatre.

Semiotics reveals that ambiguity is one of the essential functions displayed by art images. So in the film, the photographer is the ‘only’ witness of an image of what seems to be a dead body in a park; but this will not be true (visible) because he will not be able to share the meaning of its fragment to collectively construct an interpretation, however illusory, let alone reconstruct a *real* meaning to relate it to. This of course amounts to being *blind*, which seems to be Antonioni’s hidden message: due to his *opseoscopic* method in the film (putting our gaze under his command), he will be able to reveal to us, the audience, our scandalous role as blind accomplices.

Is our gaze destined to isolate us from one another? Are the images condemned to a *fate* beyond our control? What kind of cultural signs are film and narrative images under these conditions? These seem to be some of Antonioni’s thematic (and stylistic) questions as an artist. In the final sequence, the distance between a bad dream and reality becomes ostensibly *blurred*: the photographer—back at the crime-scene for the second time—discovers in stupor that there is no longer a corpse lying in the ditch. Under these conditions, being the ‘only’ witness (with us on the other side of the screen, of course) of that tiny photographic detail, the meaning he has ‘recreated’ does not provide enough *visible*, reliable, credible evidence.

The final scene shows him again in the park, this time in a different area, watching an illusory tennis game between two mimes (pranksters actually). He has merged inadvertently with the public around the tennis-court: a troupe of prankster-mimes as well. One of the players sends the ball off the court: an invisible, imaginary tennis ball, thrown in the direction of the photographer, who is prompted to retrieve it and send it back to the court. He walks in the direction indicated by the (female) mime-player and ‘sees’ the ball; Antonioni’s camera follows him allowing us to also see the ball, emphasising the role of his gaze embedded in the audience’s eyes. The photographer

‘finds’ the ball and tosses it back to the court in one full plane-sequence. Then *invisibility* takes pre-eminence above the visual appearances of the *real* because now, besides the mimes’ troupe, the film director and the photographer, we, the public in the film theatre, become unveiled as co-authors of an act of prestidigitation and *liminality*. The viewers have been there all the time, included as collective witness (or accomplices) of Antonioni’s *inner image* or plot within the plot if you will. Then, in the last seconds of the film, the photographer in the foreground fades out from the scene and the film’s credits come up to the front of the screen, accompanied by particularly *diegetic* music⁴⁹ and *Blow Up* ends. Since the year the movie was released, the awe this masterpiece produces among public, film students, academics and critics continues to grow (<http://youtu.be/9o11LTgXPtM>).

I have connected this film masterpiece to Bryn Oh, in the first place thinking of her hidden plots, mutable-meaning images, and the layering stories around that curious *fate of the image*, which in Bryn’s case condemns images to fabricate their own reality through illusion, fragmentation and multiplicity. In Bryn’s places after all, that is what ‘we’ as avatars do: interplay with the fate of (digital) images in the process of becoming something else, like the audience in *Blow Up*.

In this sense, Bryn’s managing of plots parallels *Blow Up*, indeed in the way she sorts and layers, multiplying the ‘user’s gaze’ into the stream of the author’s ideal(ised) hidden story of images. In fact Bryn performs very similar signature operations to those of Antonioni’s in *Blow Up*. In essence the process of acknowledging that your avatar has found something hidden in a work of art, connecting it to secrets (that others possibly have missed) or meanings in her œuvre, are the elements that I believe allow the viewer to add themselves to Bryn’s *machinima* as if they were having a ‘real’ experience in *Immersiva*.

⁴⁹ “*Diegesis* is a Greek word for ‘recounted story, the film’s *diegesis* is the total world of the story action. *Diegetic* sound or music whose source is visible on the screen or whose source is implied to be present by the action of the film: voices of characters; sounds made by objects in the story; music represented as coming from instruments in the story space *Diegetic* sound is any sound presented as originated from source within the film’s world.” <http://filmsound.org/terminology/diegetic.htm> (accessed October 11, 2011)

As Bryn has already mentioned, her audience is the kind of people who have the patience and curiosity to look beneath rocks in awe, looking beyond the secret life of bugs. The immersion in which she is most interested, comes from looking below the surface of a work and under the hidden layers.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

Bryn's work is notorious for its para-oneiric conditions of the immersion techniques that rely on an intensive process of transference between the real subjectivity behind the avatar ('her' real mind and eyes) and the projected subjective-patterns imbued in the avatar that represents 'her', but whose gaze is imposed at least momentarily in 'your' avatar. On the other hand, the affective exchange produced, amplified and accelerated through narrative and poetry contributes to the construction of interpersonal and intimate bonds across our expanded subjectivity. To achieve this, the quality of Bryn's poetry, unifying both visual and textual realms, guarantees attracting the attention of visitors and aggregating them to her narratives.



**Figure 15: Lacan Visiting Virginia in Bryn Oh's *Virginia Alone*, 2011
(Personal Screenshot from Second Life)**

Examples of this are, as I have already mentioned, *Dreams* and *The Path*, both collaborative projects, and also the recent and touching *Virginia Alone*. Following D'Aloia's theory of autoempathy and, to some extent, Goffman's theories of the unavoidable self-interlocutory presentation and representation of the 'self' in public, I have elaborated upon playing with inter to intra-subjectivity patterns across narrative and interaction in virtual environments. These two fields implicate identity, subjectivity and telepresence (in the sense of having your 'self' represented virtually in a synthetic world), and both are areas in which Bryn's work excels.

The complex process in which playing with real and non-real, true and false identity within a *liminal* circuit connects this world with the virtual, so that the artist invests SL (in the process) with the atmosphere of an almost ideal venue for residents interested in playing with dynamic structures of the self. subjectivity and the ineffable projection of an alter-image in a 3D virtual environment—two or more *selves* responding to one mind via digital technology and virtual mediation. This is the point of insertion that connects Bryn's work to the term *fate of the image* (and its future) of which Rancière writes extensively in "The Future of the Image", a reflection on the multiple nature of the link between words and images. His central purpose is to explain the image's constitutive relation between two components: the *sayable* and the *visible* which, according to him, might not be fully adequate, nor easy, to separate from one another.

There exists, almost permanently, a "certain idea of fate and a certain idea of the image ... tied up in the apocalyptic discourse of today's cultural climate" (Rancière 1). In other words, Rancière affirms that the image serves several functions at once and that, ultimately, it is the 'material' from which today's reality is made and, consequently, reality cannot be apprehended universally and univocally. The main "labour of art" in this sense, is to provide paths to reorganise the alignments of such oscillation and proliferation of functions through meaning.

I am deliberately trying to re-phrase the terms Rancière uses, to disclose, at least analogically, two components that Bryn, more intuitively (as a visual artist), and Calvino and Antonioni, more professionally as writer and filmmaker respectively, follow in their

assemblage of stylistic and aesthetic paths, the plasticity of which seems to embrace a certain ‘multifunctionality’ of images signalled by Rancière. It is ostensibly manifest that the three of them understand the idea of ‘image’ in its vastest sense, transcending the *visual*. The image does not exhaust itself in its iconicity. The first impression Lacan (and I) had of Bryn’s SL art triggered a natural connection to many and varied visual and literary memories, including Italo Calvino, Rancière’s conference and Antonioni’s *Blow Up*.

In the first reference, not surprisingly, I have followed a path to the idea of *utopia* in Calvino. According to some specialists, Calvino’s *utopia* is an idea amply grounded in the principles of *visibility*, *lightness* and *multiplicity*. These same values are present, although in a distinct way and responding to different objectives, in *Blow Up*, Antonioni’s movie. Bryn Oh’s work can be strategically examined through these same principles via, to be precise, her enchanted *doors of perception* that she applies in her work as a principle of *visibility* and *imagination*. Hence my aim, set out in the introduction of this Chapter, was to approach this topic from the vectors of *visibility*, *imagination* and *telepresence*, which are consistently manifest through *myth-making* or *narrative Immersiva*.

On a purely theoretical level, Bryn’s ‘puzzle-like’ method actually reveals, from my perspective, a possible **fourth vector** to my analytical ‘plot’, and one that is worthy of future study: her perspective on *machinima* and SL-based art work is twofold, being *narrative and fictional literature* on the one hand, and *making collective the subjective vision* from the artist to the virtual world audience via *liminality*.

4.4 Links and SLURLs

Bryn Oh’s Immersiva

<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Immersiva/28/127/21>

Bryn Oh YouTube channel

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BrynOh/featured>

Bryn Oh blogspot

brynoh.blogspot.com

Bryn Oh bliptv

<http://blip.tv/bryn-oh>

Antonioni's Blow Up, Trailer (extended)

<http://youtu.be/2Xz1utzILj4>

Antonioni's Blow Up, At the park

<http://youtu.be/-ywa6qeYJAg>

Antonioni's Blow Up, End part

<http://youtu.be/9o11LTgXPtM>

Chapter 5

5 China Tracy – Overview

Chapter 5 begins with the description of the relation between the avatar artist China Tracy and the person behind her in AL: the renowned Chinese artist Cao Fei. Lacan Galicia (my SL avatar) describes his experience with Cao Fei's oeuvre in SL as ones of expansion of visual, cinematic and literary memories. In the second part of Section 1, Lacan connects these to *RMB City. A Second Life City Planning* in which Cao's narrative blending of *machinima*, oneiric, biographic, fictional, and media art material unfolds as aesthetic perspective and online media artwork.

Section 2 begins by recounting exhibitions and interviews related to artwork made prior to, during and after the realisation (and public presentation) of *RMB City* in 2009, the purpose being to create a series of analogies, articulations and threads of analyses. The goal is to delimit a *tighter* context in which one may appreciate the when, how and why of China Tracy's *modus operandi*, which—unlike the other artists in this study—does not depend on a single thematic or aesthetic perspective, nor a single dimension from which to approach the work. Rather, *RMB City* is examined as the *natural* (but not the only) place for the bond between the artist and the avatar to solidify.

The last part of Section 2 is devoted to the exposition of the analogical model followed to carry out the examination of *RMB City*. The proposed analogy connects Cao's preoccupations, choices and methods to the work of French filmmaker Jacques Tati in his 1967 master piece *Playtime*, and to Italo Cavino's 1972 novel *Invisible Cities*, the latter cited extensively in the artist's website and blog. This method, previously used in Chapter 4, seeks, on this occasion, to locate common paths between the three creators, in Cao's case particularly regarding her use of images, interaction, cinematics, code and narratives. These are put into dialogue for the purpose of pulling the underlying fabric of common aesthetic goals to the surface, and revealing the way in which SL-based art is effectively contributing to reshaping epistemologies on digitality and virtuality.

The Chapter ends with Concluding Remarks, which will be further elaborated upon in the Conclusions of this thesis.

5.1 Section 1: China Tracy

The Great Khan has dreamed of a city; he describes it to Marco Polo: ... “Set out, explore every coast, and seek this city ... Then come back and tell me if my dream corresponds to reality.” “Forgive me, my lord, there is no doubt that sooner or later I shall set sail from that dock,” Marco says, “but I shall not come back to tell you about it. The city exists and it has a simple secret: it knows only departures, not returns.”⁵⁰

I construct, and I am constructed in a mutually recursive process that continually engages my fluid, permeable boundaries and my endlessly ramifying networks. I am a spatially extended cyborg.⁵¹

5.1.1 A Young Artist from Guangzhou Goes to SL: *i.Mirror*

Cao Fei was born in 1978 and raised in Guangzhou in the province of Guangdong in southern China, where she grew up fed on Hong Kong comedies, foreign films, ceaseless urbanisation plans and MTV. China Tracy is her Second Life avatar, who displays sex appeal and a fun and relaxed, yet critical and intellectually incisive, gaze towards global commercialised culture. China’s embracing of western culture since the mid eighties is a recurring phenomenon in China Tracy’s work, from philosophical curiosity and ambivalence more than anxiety or mourning. For Cao Fei, questions of authenticity around her work in Actual Life (AL) and Second Life (SL) are approached playfully and humouristically, with the ability to use images and influences from popular culture, throwing out the ‘right’ card and the necessary elements to sustain her political and social critique *aesthetically*, and not the other way around.

To begin, I will refer to earlier pieces such as *Cosplayers* (2006) and *i.Mirror* (2006-07), before then concentrating on *RMB City* in Section 2 of this Chapter. *i.Mirror* is a three-part *machinima* work that opens with the quote of Mitchell (2003) the second below the heading of Section 1 above). The work presents China Tracy’s first forays into SL and

⁵⁰ Calvino 1974 55-56.

⁵¹ Mitchell 39.

experimenting with situations while ‘living’ in the virtual: exploring, buying, talking, building, even falling in love with a young male avatar and then grieving the separation. A *machinima* video was presented at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) when the renowned Cao Fei represented China in the Chinese Pavilion.

i.Mirror is a direct antecedent to *RMB City*, which took inspiration and gained traction shortly after the Biennale’s presentation. In *i.Mirror*, the goal was to explore the boundaries between the *metaverse*’s space and the physical one, acknowledging the role performed by China Tracy in both: from her appearance and personality, to the spaces and objects created, and the symbolism of both the existential and the real aspirations and experiences living in contemporary urban China. In this sense, SL represented an preferred platform for the examination, discussion and ‘testing’ of the influences of the virtual world on the real, and vice versa. This process—launched by aesthetic exchange and social relations in online networked virtual worlds—ends with an enhanced awareness of the concept of the *real*: one that, without doubt, includes the virtual.

Cao’s response to this challenge is effective and highly creative. On the one hand, it reveals an enormous talent as a multidisciplinary artist fed by global pop culture from Taiwan and Hong Kong, Japanese *manga*, and hip hop and skate cultures from California. On the other, it shows the state of art in today’s shared co-creation through digital, virtual and networked tools. In this sense, Cao becomes a sort of alchemist, amalgamating and balancing aesthetic components, market trends and subjective procedures. China Tracy, thus, is a critical commentator on virtual worlds and current westernised China, without losing sex appeal and humour in the process.

Under Cao Fei’s trained eye, poetic narrative inclinations, and her audio visual skills, China Tracy has explored the social documents of alienation, melancholy, exuberance, indifference, anesthetised recognition of the past, and the ambiguous sense of belonging-not-belonging among Chinese youth. In Cao’s shiny, ironic and theatrical aesthetics, ‘happiness’ and more recently ‘innocence’ are present absences or absent presences most of the time. Alongside this prominence, there exists melancholy and suspiciously sacred gestures on a fuzzy borderline between the power to turn reality (and virtuality) inside

out, or watch it decay in the electronic shadows of the screen. In other words, by blurring the boundaries between illusion, reality, rationality, absurdity and synthetic illustration or vignettes, China's true urban contemporary desolation and alienation surfaces: Cao Fei has said on several occasions that "imbalance is our ongoing experience ... a disease of adolescence" (Albertini). That is why alongside happiness and innocence, humour and irony are also present in her *mythopoeia* about the anxieties and 'bizarre' lives of her generation.



Figure 16: Cao Fei, Multimedia-Künstlerin zwischen den Welten - Part 1
 (Personal Screenshot YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPgazFGi_8
 >)

5.1.2 Memory, Space, Mirrors and a Talkative Virtual Baby

At 5'36" into China Tracy's video *Live in RMB City*, China Sun (her virtual baby son) begins the following dialogue with his mother:

CS: Mom, is there death in Second Life?

CT: If God is a mighty programmer, then death in the real world just means that our programming has in some way or form left the hardware that sustains it.

Whereas in *Second Life*, humans can create eternal avatars that act as substitutes and can attain eternal life. Birth is just registering an ‘account’, and ‘death’ is just a form of ‘cancellation’ like in the world of *The Matrix* ... climbing in and out of the real and virtual worlds.

CS: If my little boat sinks, has it gone to another sea?

CT: Child, what are you talking about?

CS: Mom, I want to look like an idiot. (Live)

During the dialogue, the camera continuously shifts position and framing so that panning alternates with different shots. Their function is to provide a panoramic syntax, an emotional mood as a visual map of *RMB City*, one of Cao Fei’s artworks that will be explained at length below (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/RMB%20City%201/154/33/126>). Subjective first-planes and close ups of China Tracy and China Sun alternate; they are semiotic and rhetorical elements making visually ‘tangible’ the verbal dialogue which, at times, reaches the status of poetic narrative. An intimate story between mother and son projected by their respective avatars, flowing in a synthetic environment in SL. Although Cao became a mother for the second time in 2011, China Sun is the avatar of her first son in actual life (Sun), born in 2009. The video’s multiply-threaded narrative led Lacan Galicia, my SL avatar, to the identification of two components in Cao’s *modus operandi*: 1. A sort of *Cao’s spatial and narrative aesthetics* materialised in *RMB City* as a ‘home’ that allows the site to function as a public virtual hub for common people, artists and art-related businesses in the *metaverse*; and 2. The ‘unleashing’ of poetic and narrative threads put into action by Cao’s *mythopoeia* and script techniques to animate objects and actions, thanks to her skills in 3D virtual art, graphic design and telepresence interaction. This varied articulation implies, to me, that Cao understands SL art as inevitably open to experimentation, mutation and task-oriented improvisation bound to build *RMB’s liminal reality*—a meaningful one as it occurs between worlds precisely because of its *liminality*.

This relates to the *identities* of the SL avatar China Tracy and the AL artist Cao Fei, which deliberately alternate, merge and bounce off each other. Unlike the other three case studies in this thesis, Cao Fei’s alternating-merging-bouncing is intended to work as a narrative device creating, through two ‘bodies’ and ‘personalities’, the ‘characters’ of CF and CT, moving along the indeterminate borders of *liminality*. In contrast to Bryn Oh,

Cao Fei does not conceal one identity or the other from the public eye, but rather the contrary is true: she emphasises that between her alternating and merging identities there exists a flowing stream, a continuum.

I found all of this to be a core element in her aesthetic approach to the relationship between media, information, technology and art. When interviewed or asked, Cao's response is ambiguous yet without hesitation she declares: she is *not always sure*, to some extent, *who is who*. One might say that Cao Fei is somehow destined to be China Tracy's alter ego (and alter image, too) and vice versa. So whenever one sees China Tracy performing in the *metaverse*, one cannot forget that Cao Fei is the *real* mind, eyes and senses behind her; she is the young woman in tele-command of every movement, decision, action, word and image produced by the avatar-artist. And vice versa: whenever one thinks of Cao's talent and success as a contemporary media artist, one cannot forget about the conspicuous and fun virtual presence of China Tracy. Remarkably, what Cao emphasises is that such metaphoric treatment of 'reality' belongs to *both* the virtual and the actual, and in no way is there a specific interest or aim to rank which one comes first or second, or to separate one from the other.

This can be appreciated from the time of her successful participation at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007), up to more recent projects like *Interview Marathon in RMB City* (March 2009) in which "China Tracy (RL: Cao Fei) JuliaPeytonJones Popstar (RL: Julia Peyton Jones) and HansUlrichObrist Magic (RL: Hans Ulrich Obrist) had an interesting dialogue which took the form of a marathon in RMB City" (Interview Marathon). At some point in the marathon China Tracy became transformed into 'The People's Avatar' in the same way a shaman, magician or psychic medium channels others' voices. For a period of an hour, real people were allowed to 'incarnate' the avatar China Tracy, assuming her digital mask in the same way that

an Olympic Torch is passed from one runner's hand to the next. The resulting dialogue may form a sort of exquisite corpse, with China Tracy as the literal (virtual?) body, challenging conceptions of identity, performance, and narrative. The event was documented as an episode of RMB-TV, a new conceptual platform to examine RMB City as theatrical stage. (Interview Marathon)

To me, this demonstrates the continuum of which Cao Fei is so emphatic, from *i.Mirror* as a direct antecedent, to the narrative, theatrical and even magic (or esoteric) possibilities that one might find in *RMB City* and later in *Interview Marathon*. All of these experiences led Cao to the plans for creating her own virtual city in SL. Once being selected to represent the Chinese pavilion at the Biennale, she designed an architecturally soft, cloud-shaped pneumatic installation within which computer terminals were logged into SL and projectors displayed *i.Mirror* on a screen, sharing the inner space with all. *RMB City* was born (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/RMB%20City%201/154/33/126>).



Figure 17: Cao Fei, China Tracy Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennial, 2007.

Installation and online project (Second Life), video

(<http://caofei.com/exhibitions.aspx?id=37&year=2007>)

5.1.3 On Sacred Buildings that You Can Carry in Your Pocket

‘Both’ Wagner James Au, the renowned SL and VW journalist, and his avatar Halmet Au have visited *RMB City* often and written about China Tracy. In his description of Cao’s work, Au underlines an interesting point about the symbolism of certain buildings, plazas, “epochs and ideologies that you couldn’t see from where the party roared, but

knew were still there” (Au 1). Au refers to emblematic Chinese sites like Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, which are all ‘present’ in *RMB City*—not physically, but their meaning and symbolism are in permanent mutation. Hosting a range of *alien* activities in the virtual such as an inner water stream, flying swans, dancing communist-era heroes and a factory that drops buildings, Cao Fei plays with these sacred buildings in her role as storyteller and social-political-aesthetic analyst.

Not surprisingly, things look much closer to actual life and places (Beijing in this case) than one thinks. From a digital aesthetics angle, what is remarkable is that this assumption can be formulated in the reverse: *RMB City* turned out to be, not surprisingly, quite a description of the dreams, hopes, failures and utopias around contemporary urbanised industrial China, seen from the eyes of an artist. Au emphasises these aspects:

In the Summer of 2007 she helped bring me to Beijing for the Get It Louder Arts festival, so I could tell the attendees what the user-created virtual world called Second Life meant for their future, a digital age where reality was up for grabs. ... But far closer to us—and I'll never forget noticing this—skyscrapers much higher than ours were still being built. And though it was running toward midnight and even Beijing's streets were finally at a relative calm, construction didn't end at sundown, as you might expect. So while the party trailed off, and we stumbled off to eat, I could still see the sporadic white flashing of arc welders, as they briefly lit up the naked skeletons of towers being added to a city that never stopped changing. (Au 1)

The symbolism can be ideologically related to Cao's early years as a teenager surrounded by mass media, western movies and commercial culture, transforming the behaviour and lives of China's youth generation. It is responsible for her blooming as a visual and multi-media artist, resumed in the idea that digital times effectively transform reality and its symbolism into relational, collectable, exchangeable and *disposable* items for hybridising, substitution, upgrading or just plain discarding. Thus, anyone could create his or her preferred context by disposing of a number of digital objects and other cultural significantants that one might carry in a pocket or find in the SL inventory pane, extracting from these virtual replicas and play-acting at constructing a possible idea of the future or even a *utopia*.

Wagner James Au clearly explains how the influences neatly displayed in Cao's SL oeuvre actually underline the unstable, fragmented, transitional and permutable aspects of the sociocultural meaning. Sustained in digital technology and network communications—on a daily basis—these have become embedded in our experience of the real *as virtual*, and vice versa. In this sense, her user-created virtual world in Second Life emerged, logically, as the preferred *portal* with its utopian 'symbolism' attached to a multifunctional urbanised space, the true visual 'materiality' of which is, paradoxically, intangible and because of that it still holds a utopian vision of the future.

To wrap up these reflections, allow me to remark that there is an extended belief that virtual worlds and real ones should, fatally, mirror each other, particularly in the western world. Perhaps because that is in line with, and preserves, a dominant cultural tendency toward *similarity patterns* so embedded in our perception of the world. There is also the non conscious search for organisational paths that start at the level of our biological perceptual system and extend to our culture-constructed idea of 'the world'.

When these are side by side, a sort of complementarity might emerge: on the 'dark side' of our unconscious and our capacity for daydreaming and fantasising, narrative and myth creation lurk *virtually* (in both literal and metaphorical senses). At some point, one denounces the other (so to speak) and chaos, panic or nightmares arise—but also rapture, epiphany, illumination and allegory in the manner of fascination for the unknown and the unseen that one has learned to sense as 'familiar'. These have been, traditionally, the natural territories for artists. As outlined in Chapter 4, *fantasy*, *visibility* and *imagination* are tightly knit into the digital aesthesia exchange in the *metaverse*.

5.1.4 The Social, Political and Cultural Construction of a Virtual Hub: On Cultural Symbiosis, Synthetic Realities, Mysticism and Virtual Architecture

Cao Fei's gravity-defying city of *RMB* becomes her own *transposed* image of contemporary Beijing—Lichty would say *transliterated* (2009 Translation)—assuming that Beijing only exists in the eye and mind of the artists as image because it fuses both planes: the real (factual and historically materialised) and the virtual

(phenomenologically transmuted in hypertext). It also recalls, due to its hovering quality, the flying island of Laputa described in Jonathan Swift's 1726 *Gulliver's Travels*. Indeed, the title of an interview with Jérôme Sans, Director of the Ullens Center for Chinese Contemporary Art, is "Fly Me to the Virtual Laputa" (Sans), a clear reference to the book. In Section 2 I will comment on this point in relation to code, language and mystical events in *RMB*. It seems to me that Cao's version of Beijing somehow emerged more 'real' from inner imagination than from the tangible city outside, confirming the ambiguous but inclusive character of the virtual, visualised—so to speak—in relation to the idea of the city as, essentially, something external due to creative, narrative needs and cultural history. Lacan Galicia perceived this at the subsequent art exhibitions and performances in *RMB City*, which seem to carry on a subjacent theme: the encounter of western and eastern complementary cosmo-visions. Indeed, also present is the quest for magic, sacred and spiritual streams of knowledge and energy, around the idea that the mystical also operates in the city (in many ways it contributes symbolically to its formation). A few pieces by artists contributing to *RMB City* illustrate this: Huang He's *Master Q's Guide to Virtual Feng Shui* (2009) shows gourds of virtue placed in five orientation spots of *RMB City* following Feng Shui guidelines and other important spiritual traditions; *Dream Umbrellas* (2008) by Gazira Babeli and Man Michinaga in which desired objects from the public drop from a magic umbrella handed to your avatar; and the *No Lab* (2010) collaboration with architects Gutiérrez and Portefaix evoking an allegorical landscape around a mythical image of post-Katrina New Orleans, a utopia of waiting and future.

An analogy is posed around these elements in *RMB City*, pairing them to previously mentioned arguments around Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, and now other elements from *visuality* and the city as a performing entity (or deity) as in the case of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967). In each of them, I see resemblances communicating utopian visions related to Cao Fei's reading of the City as a place in which physical, metaphysical, material and spiritual energies conflate—remarkably—through poetry, symbolism, social bonding, imagination and *visibility*. I will develop this framework in more detail in the next section of this Chapter.

RMB City was built with the aid of a hired development firm, *Avatrian*, in tandem with Cao's friends at Vitamin Creative Space (Beijing). They first listed options and landmarks, including all they desired to build in the city. Then it was executed with the commitment to creating a place that would remain open to everybody, as stated by China Tracy in an interview to curator Leesa Fanning: "RMB City is a meeting point between AL and SL, as its manifesto goes. It's my city and your city too ... because *RMB City* has to become an alternative platform and an institution at the same time" (Fanning). In a different reportage at Art21⁵² from the Season 5 episode 'Fantasy' one reads the following:

"Fantasy" presents four artists—Cao Fei, Mary Heilmann, Jeff Koons, and Florian Maier-Aichen—whose hallucinatory, irreverent, and sublime works transport us to imaginary worlds and altered states of consciousness. Cao Fei's work reflects the fluidity of a world in which cultures have mixed and diverged in rapid evolution. Her video installations and new media works explore perception and reality in places as diverse as a Chinese factory and the virtual world of Second Life. (Art21 Season <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgSVfKW2dn0&feature=autoplay&list=PL48AD977B9913AE3E&index=7&playnext=1>)

Cao Fei's multidimensional art produces work with almost any media and resources at hand, from graphic design to filmmaking and documentary, from painting to sampling to role-play and video. An undercurrent running through her work is to capture peoples' desires both in terms of identity, self representation and the ephemeral and many times deceiving nature of the exchange between the real and the virtual. At *RMB City*, this is reflected particularly in Cao's disillusion in concordance with China's younger generation. As such, the notion of utopia is evident in her determination to make *RMB* a virtual hub, the open nature of which makes it a place for experimentation, an emergent creative resource for virtual artists that also works as an institutionalised place hosting the contemporary cultural industries of both the western and eastern worlds.

⁵² "Over the past decade, Art21 has established itself as the preeminent chronicler of contemporary art and artists through its Peabody Award-winning biennial television series, 'Art in the Twenty-First Century.' The nonprofit organization has used the power of digital media to introduce millions of people of all ages to contemporary art and artists and has created a new paradigm for teaching and learning about the creative process" (Art21 About).

Perhaps in AL this might seem like a paradoxical double condition difficult to behold, one that would inevitably lead to failure. In SL, however, it is indeed possible, much like an *invisible city* in the most Calvinian sense. It is not surprising that Cao Fei quotes Calvino's *Invisible Cities* in the first lines of *RMB City's* manifesto, and with this she demonstrates not only her fascination with Second Life as a territory for imagination, but also the weight that a platform of social and politically-bound possibilities can have, as reflected in the potentiality of the site to create work where visiting artists become fused in an ambivalent and poetically empowered 'space', balancing unseen and visible features. This will become clearer in Section 2.

In 2009, Uli Sigg (SL: Ulisigg Cisse) was elected first mayor of *RMB City*. He is a renowned collector of contemporary Chinese art, and used to be the Swiss ambassador to China in AL. His enthusiasm for the wave of emergent Chinese artists since the late nineties led to him promoting Chinese Art in the western world, such as introducing it to the Venice Biennale, and setting up the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards. Ulisigg Cisse acquired one of the 'buildings' at *RMB City*, the People Palace's—City Hall denominated after the purchase as Sigg Castle. The castle is commonly the first building greeting visitors arriving at *RMB*, and resembles Beijing's Forbidden City with its yellow tiles and red walls in the style of the Qing Dynasty. An information centre (in which Lacan Galicia, my avatar, lived, worked and hung out for a short time during the winter of 2010) is on the first floor. This is the hub where visiting avatars receive information and news, and gather with artists and professionals. On the second floor there is the City's Law Court, and on the third the VIP room for meeting artists, curators and distinguished visitors.

The Palace is the place where announcements and official events take place, as well as a monthly reunion for *RMB* citizens⁵³ and their Mayor. A relevant point in regards to Uli

⁵³ As part of its media and social network presence, Cao and the RMB team have launched a number of initiatives like the call for RMB citizenship: "Become a citizen: What does it mean to be a citizen of a virtual city? ... Join our RMB City group in Second Life. Visit, explore, create, discuss ... Join our RL mailing list (www.rmbcity.com/maillinglist.php)" (People's Monthly 37).

Sigg's art collection is the role that this palace, his virtual property, has in relation to other items in his impressive collection:

[For me] it is meant to extend the scope of my collection into new spaces—virtual and real at the same time, collecting a process, bits, and real pieces. If it will not (extend the scope), and if it will not make me sweat, I will be upset. Actually I perceive myself more as a researcher who is just fortunate enough to have means to acquire some results of his research. (People's Monthly Hear 3)

Essentially I see this as the quest for the meaning of the relationship between this virtual city and contemporary cities in China. Sigg affirms that it is not sure there's none at all, but the reverse is also possible: maybe *RMB* could be a 'model' for modern Chinese cities. In any case that would depend on a collective weaving of meanings from the public, investors, corporate and cultural entities, contractors, *RMB* citizens, architects, art collectors, virtual worlds theoreticians and—especially—SL art creators. “Will they still maintain their limitations ingrained by lifelong reality? Will they be able to think without boundaries? Then something new and useful for real Chinese cities may arise” observes mayor Sigg (People's Monthly Hear 3).



**Figure 18: Lacan Galicia in RMB City Hall—Sigg Castle
(Personal Screenshot from Second Life)**

I will conclude this section of the Chapter with a recap of Cao Fei's artwork:

She has appeared in solo exhibitions at:

The Serpentine Gallery, London (2008)

Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California (2007)

Museum Het Domein, Sittard, Netherlands (2006)

Para Site Art Space, Hong Kong (2006).

She has also participated at:

The New Museum Triennial (2009)

Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2008)

Prospect.1 New Orleans (2008)

The Yokohama Triennial (2008)

The Biennials of Istanbul, Lyon, and Venice (2007).

Cao Fei's work has been also presented at:

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2008)

The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2007)

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City (2006)

Asia Society, New York (2006).

(Art21 Cao Fei)

5.2 Section 2: An Analogical Examination of RMB City

“From now on, I’ll describe the cities to you,” the Khan had said, “in your journeys you will see if they exist.” But the cities visited by Marco Polo were always different from those thought of by the emperor.

“And yet I have constructed in my mind a model city from which all possible cities can be deduced,” Kublai said. “It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degree from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations.”

“I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others,” Marco answered. “It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists. So I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist. But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real.”⁵⁴

5.2.1 A Four-Point Manifesto

RMB (Rembee) is the name of Chinese currency so the name of *RMB City* could be translated as *Money Town* or *Economy City*. In May 2009 Cao Fei made the *RMB City Manifesto* public:

RMB City Manifesto

(RMB—to be ReMember)

The Castle of Crossed Destinies, Italo Calvino.

Two spectres are hovering over a city of lightness

-virtual spectres. In the name of the Holy War against them, everything from the old world united

-human beings, landscape, faith and prophecies, rules and wisdom.

Now, it's time for RMB City to make the declaration to the world about its view, its purpose and its intention. It's time to manifest to people: this is a city that you can't wipe out from your memory.

1. Us

RMB City is an adjective, a loose dream and some random coincidences. You wave to me in the pink crystal when I'm about to land on the softest of all earth, one foot in the virtual atmosphere, and one still remains on the cold, hard floor of my real life.

Come run with me, you disturbed being. Those we desire are not far away, the city is going to tell us what to think and the different versions of our stories, in the past, the present, and the future.

⁵⁴ Calvino 1974 69.

2. Mirroring City

“It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions.”
—Marco Polo

RMB City is not a city of magical mirror, it doesn't restore the full present, nor does it recall our reminiscence of the past. It's a mirror that partially reflects; we see where we were coming from, discover some of the 'connections that fill the pale zone between the real and the virtual, the clues of which get disturbed, enriched, and polished. New orders are born, so are new, strange wisdom.

The sea above the city is reflected on the shattering white night; fire from the chimney pokes through the cloud, burning the flag red; sky-elevator is ascending towards the sun, trembling; a missile flies a trajectory of no return; the river flows through the secret tunnel in the palace and warms up the buildings along its banks; a lonely knight strolls across the stretched-out villages; angels and madmen are having a duel among the ruins of collapsed buildings and the abandoned fields; the astute businessmen are busying on the container dock; a batwoman is contemplating in the air between skyscrapers; the kind beast has its desire for love realized... *We are trying to uncover the secrets of this city, and to discover ourselves in the shadow of virtuality.* We can see *the city's rare moment of sublimity and its boiling colors*, we can breath its free air through our consciousness, we can even feel the humidity, and the power of love.

3. Virtual / Real

“The core of the world is emptiness, the rule of the moving things and objects in the universe is empty space, those which exist revolve around non-existence...”
—ParsifalIf [sic]: what we see and touch are real, what we breath and feel are virtual; our voice is real, our memory is virtual; fortune is real, poverty is virtual; fulfilment is real, sadness is virtual; resentment is real, affection is virtual; foolishness is real, wisdom is virtual; reigning is real, endurance is virtual; living is real, dying is virtual; the land is real, the sky is virtual...then, from this moment on, let all the virtual-real conflicts vanish in RMB City. Flee from the twilight of the real world, try reversing all the discussions about realness by shifting them into the virtual light year. Be vertical against or parallel to the virtual, *stab through the protection of reality with the sword of virtualness.* This time, the once-invincible real is the defeated one.

4. The World

‘The World’ depicted on the tarot is a city with round barrier. Our world, however, is constructed with ‘transparency’ and ‘imagination’, does it exist? It may not be. Even if it exists now, it won't in the future. It could end after our visit, and start over again when we return. Eventually, after numerous fleeing and sneaking in, we will have the experience the whole World.***“Did you ever happen to see a city resembling this one?” Kublai Khan asked Marco Polo. “No,

sire,” Marco answered, “I should never have imagined a city like this could exist.” RMB City is such a city, you are sincerely welcomed. (China Tracy City, my emphasis)

For Lacan, the four-point manifesto is remarkable for two reasons: 1. Each of the four points is visualised and symbolically sorted as a tarot arcane (see the allusion to Calvino’s *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*); and 2. The references to the *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, Marco Polo and Parsifal, allow me to introduce an analogy to the work of Jacques Tati and Italo Calvino, within a context outlined not exclusively by me, but evidently suggested by Cao Fei as well.

RMB City was officially opened to the SL public in 2009 and since then it has hosted about a dozen events and art projects that experiment with media and virtual-to-real connection, and vice versa. I see *RMB* as a *topographic* development in the *metaverse* that, for socio-cultural (even political) reasons, re-enacted—aesthetically—a number of Chinese landmarks. According to Cornell (2011) these are treated plastically as an inspired ‘vision’ of contemporary China at the top of the world’s economy:

With land for sale, and subjects needed, RMB City rapidly evolved into a collaboration with the contemporary Chinese art world. Prominent collectors such as Uli Sigg and the Ullens Centre [sic] for Contemporary Art purchased buildings and were accordingly given positions as mayors. Curators and fellow artists took on Second Life avatars and engaged with the project as citizens. A virtual Yokohama Triennale was even held in the city’s streets (a dancing, slightly drunken version), resulting in the film *Play with Your Triennale* (2008) which was shown later at the actual festival. As the city developed, its pumped up colours, youthful avatars and illusions of confidence came to suggest not only the hyper-reality of contemporary Beijing, or even global consumerism, but the international art world itself. (Cornell 44)

A retrospective list of events at *RMB City* includes:

Annals of *RMB City*

2007-2009

Concepts of RMB City’s urban planning confirmed, Jun, 2007

Video of RMB City’s urban planning finished, Aug, 2007

Land Purchase in Second life, Jun, 2008

Building of RMB City commenced, Jun, 2008

AL Exhibition

The 52nd Venice Biennale (Venice, Italy) Jun 10, 2007-Nov 21, 2007

The 10th Istanbul Biennale (Istanbul, Turkey) 2007-Nov 04, 2007

Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art (Oslo, Norway) Sep 08, 2007-Dec 02, 2007

Art Basel Miami Beach (Miami, USA) Dec 06, 2007-Dec 09, 2007

Shenzhen & Hong Kong Bi-city of Urbanism and Architecture Biennale (Shenzhen, China & Hong Kong SAR) Dec 08, 2007-Mar 08, 2008

Lombard-Freid Projects (New York, USA) Feb 29, 2008-Apr 05, 2008

Le Plateau (Paris, France) Mar 13, 2008-May 25, 2008

UCCA (Beijing, China) Jul 19, 2008–Oct 12, 2008

RMB City at the Serpentine Gallery (London, UK)

First Installation: Jul 25, 2008-Jul 25, 2009

Second installation: Mar-Dec 2009

Arnolfini (Bristol, UK) Jun 28, 2008-Aug 31, 2008

Play With Your Triennale (Yokohama, Japan) Sep 13 - November 30, 2008

Bonniers Konsthall (Stockholm, Sweden) Sep 17 - Dec 21, 2008

RMB City at Frieze Art Fair (London, UK) 16-19 October 2008

NO LAB in RMB City, Prospect.1 New Orleans (New Orleans, USA) Nov 1, 2008-Jan 18, 2009

SCAD (Lacoste, France) Jan 17-Mar 15, 2009

Second Life Events

RMB City Groundbreaking Ceremony in RMB City's newly bought land Jul 14, 2008

RMB City Preview Center Opens To The Public Jul 26, 2008

Play With Your Triennale in People's Worksite Sep 10, 2008

NO LAB in RMB City Prospect.1 New Orleans Nov 1, 2008

Love Letter to an Avatar: a special project by Mian Mian for RMB City, Nov 4, 2008

Dream Umbrellas: a special project by Man Michinaga, Gazira Babeli and Second Front

for RMB City Dec 8, 2008

RMB City Grand Opening Special ceremony Jan 10, 2009

Master Q's Guide to Virtual Feng Shui: a special project by Huang He for RMB City Jan 10, 2009

Collaboration, performance art and curatorial practices around hyper-reality (and hyper text) usually occur in the *metaverse* with subjacent matter, as I have outlined in Bryn Oh and Gazira Babeli's respective chapters. I am referring to the role of virtual places for art as a *hub* or intersection of ontologies around ideas of utopia. Since the time of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) and later *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* (1985), and particularly in his essay on *visibility*, Calvino displays an original way of writing implying a deep philosophical standing towards the act of creating: for him, *naming* the world meant including it in *writing*, recalling and recording it on paper. This is achieved by subtracting the weight of things, narrations and characters, so what is said is being removed from the chaos of the unsaid; as such, it escapes irrationality and becomes introduced in what the human mind knows, what man can name and therefore bring to visibility. In *Invisible Cities*, the places described by Marco Polo are essentially *possibilities of vision*, a tour of possible pasts that Calvino—through Marco Polo's voice—refuses to leave unseen (unnamed), recounting even those that could have been, or those that could be dismissed in favour of other ones. Thus, he acknowledges the writer's frustration, who sees in his own words a reflection of the external chaos.

At *RMB*, the city's *visibility* (and invisibility) properties express this preferred operating in both senses: the semiotic-to-symbolic and the real-to-virtual. From this stage, artists, curators and the art market, together, can proceed to the enhancement and multiplication of similar sites along the *metaverse*. Valuable perspectives from curators, architects, artists and cultural and institutional entrepreneurs like Uli Sigg or Guy and Myriam

Ullens from the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing (the chair of which is Jérôme Sans, mentioned above, who founded and directed *Le Palais de Tokyo* in Paris some 10 years ago) played an important role in Cao's multifaceted project. Thus, *RMB City* might be seen as a prototype for the collection and recollection of virtual art and emerging communication paths within the contemporary art community in the *metaverse*. The *RMB City People's Monthly Newsletter* edition of January 2009 presented a number of interviews with such professionals, and this question is illustrative from the interview with Sans:

PM: Which virtual building of *RMB City* is UCCA collecting? Why that one?
 JS: We have chosen *the spaceship* (People's Aerial Castle). *A place with no restricted geography*. It is a place ... to share experiment [sic] without restrictions, and it is a place in motion without a passport of a precise land. *A place to share and experiment without restrictions*. (Sans 5, my emphasis)

'No boundaries' is the organising principle under which UCCA fulfils its mandate. In this sense, the inclusion of a borderless approach to virtual, real, and *liminal* forms of contemporary art at the Center is logical. Sans affirms that one of the important contributions of *RMB City* to UCCA is the bridging nature that its association brought, connecting art projects within the Center to outside Beijing and into the world. "That is why Cao Fei's project *RMB City* means a lot to us ... Second Life is a major step in virtual world future developments, and will have important consequences for the future of internet exchange and the sharing of information" (Sans 5).

The intersection of art institutions with an experimental playground in the *metaverse*, is the 'design' conceived by Cao Fei. To some extent my intention in this Chapter is to examine the artist's *mythopoeia* using the *RMB* project as referent, due to the fact that it was planned and executed (I propose) as a virtual *invisible* city in Calvino's sense; that is, as a hub for visual, narrative and metaphoric possibilities to unfold. Cao's data bases, blogspot, websites and social networks are profusely fed, organised and updated with relevant critical and historical information, and her profuse oeuvre can be appreciated there. For this reason I was able to continue with her case study even when Lacan's request for an interview was courteously declined by the artist due to a hectic agenda, but not before kindly conducting me to both her official and alternative archives.

In much the same way as Bryn Oh's Chapter on *Immersiva*, here I will recur to an analogy between *RMB City* and another work of art: Jacques Tati's 1967 film *Playtime*. Tati's film is for me a magnificent example of social, philosophical and psychological critique centred almost exclusively around the city and its relationship to modern 'man'. In his film, he treats the representation of an ultra modern Paris as an ontological problem, attached to the image of *the* city. Tati creates magic by transforming an entire city (albeit fabricated, as seen below) into the protagonist of the film. In this sense it is no exaggeration to say that he employs the film's set (fabricated to the size of an actual city) as an *avatar*, playing with the metaphorical aspects derived from its visible/invisible properties.

Tati's film explores and denounces (via bitter sweet humour) the harsh and asymmetric relationship of common men and women with hyper-modernity and the challenges posed by the technocratic dehumanising utopia of the future. This theme is treated with magisterial humour, superb visual gags and social critique through a sharp 'eye' used as device to reveal or conceal *visibility*, demonstrating that irony and humour are powerful artistic 'tools' in social examination. I will elaborate on this more below.

My claim is that to these three individuals (Cao Fei, Jacques Tati and Italo Calvino), the city means a common thing: a *magical* or mystical place, the source of pleasure, knowledge, utopia and desire, but also of alienation, solitude and *anomie*. In my view, one can see these aspects fused in Cao's work in *RMB City* through an intelligent procedure (stemming from the power of code) applied to animate things, both in literal and emotional senses. Key is the emphasis the three auteurs display in thinking about *the* city, its visual, narrative and cinematic aesthetics, using imagination, humour and poetic languages to target a certain idea of the city as a place in which art, technology and society conflate with subjective *desires*. My claim is that these aesthetically modify each other, affecting human behaviour, spirit and emotion in their relation to utopian ideas of the future and the city, of the future in the city, of the future *as* a city.

5.2.2 From *Cosplayers* and *i.Mirror* in *RMB City*, to Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Cao Fei has soared onto the contemporary art scene with her videos presenting juxtapositions of provocative characters, urban sites and personal stories, showing the capacity of an artist to transform gazes. In the video *Cosplayers* (2006), although being centred on young Chinese fans impersonating characters from Japanese *Manga* (dressed as these fantasy figures and enacting mock battles in Guangzhou), she was in fact starting to explore synthetic 'virtual' dynamics brought into the 'real'. The actions of youth dressed in costumes of Japanese *Manga* implies a sort of *tour de force* entering the city, in their own way evoking not just the same dystopian atmosphere of places in SL, but also casting a 'reflective' gaze (what I refer to in this thesis as an *opseoscopic* device) on their protagonists and the public eye. In other words, by being seen as *avatars*, they evoke in viewers the illusion that they have crossed a *liminal* boundary from the virtual to real live *flesh*. Analogically, these characters recall *RMB* citizens as well as certain places and inhabitants invented by Calvino in *Invisible Cities*. For example, those of *Leonia* the 'city of consumption' or the 'dump-city' (in a world beset by its own refuse), or the citizens of *Fedora* the 'virtual city' which, according to Gaetano Pesce, is the archetype of the City-State (212).

With China Tracy's adventures and experiences in SL, Cao gained visibility, attention and an international following through her art piece *i.Mirror* (2006-07). Eleanor Heartney remarks in "Like Life", an essay for *Art in America*, that China Tracy is a "sexy young Chinese woman whose outfits include formfitting silver armour and knee-high fur boots worn with a miniskirt" (165). À propos of *i.Mirror*, Heartney further establishes that:

i.Mirror presents China's meeting with Hug Yue, a Chinese youth with long blond hair and the world-weary air of a Romantic poet. ... They are seen together and separately in various settings—on a subway car that sails out of the city and into a verdant jungle before morphing into a hot air balloon, in a deserted diner, walking down a desolate alley that is suffused with light when China is joined by Yue. Their dialogue appears in a typewritten line across the bottom of the screen, as their actual communication did when they first met in cyberspace. ... After a number of encounters marked by ambivalent, semi-philosophical conversations whose desultory tone is reminiscent of French New Wave cinema, they say good-bye and return to their first-life selves. (164-165)

Later on, handsome young Hug Yue's AL identity was revealed: he was actually a Caucasian activist in his mid sixties based out of San Francisco. Previous videos from Cao unveiling current life's lack of a defined sense and dislocation in contemporary urbanised China seem to be continued in *i.Mirror*, at least in part of it.

Besides *Leonia* and *Fedora*, *i.Mirror* also reminded Lacan of *Cloe*, *La città degli sguardi* (Chloe, The City of Gazes), analogous to a modern urban mall in China (or Tokyo) in which architecture, symbolic meaning and design become intertwined along prefigured paths, often following *opseoscopic* calculated trajectories (conducting the gaze to *the* visible, and vice versa). This is sometimes achieved by mechanical mediums, sometimes by iterative optical-informational structures, the function being to conduct the gaze to certain spaces and spots, rendering 'visible' *its* own existence along with the exposure to the audience. With this *technique*, Cao takes control of the exchange between intangible and emotional forces at play, such as desires, oblique glances (below the surface of the material), day-dreaming, (optical) illusion techniques for the remediation of solitude in an ephemeral meeting place in which an individual can 'see' and 'be seen' by her peers in a permanent—one to another—super imposed cycle:

A virtual city, but also the virtual state of the city. It changes depending on how you experience it, look at it, arrive or leave. Much as you can approach a city in many ways, there are also infinite ways to leave. From almost every point of view Fedora is a State in the past, and this is one of the few aspects that is common to the future. The State is not stable and it needs to be so in order to be. (Pesce 212, my translation).

So, despite an avatar's ability to enact performing images, identities, even myths from fantasy and representation, their inarguable mobility often depends on NPIRL conditions (those not possible in actual life). By inhabiting personae and places through our avatars, one attests to a world tinged with melancholy "as when China Tracy's paramour abandons his hipster avatar for an old-man persona that is presumably closer to his first life identity." In that sense, the not-so-subtle message in *Cosplayers* and *i.Mirror* (transplanted to *RMB City*) seems to be: "To go virtual is the only way to forget the real darkness" (Heartney 165).

5.2.3 The Wonder Years at Lombard-Freid Projects, New York: *RMB City, Playtime* and Tati's *Play Time*

As mentioned, the name of *RMB City* means *Money Town*, and this is one of the undercurrent ideas presented in 2007 at the Lombard-Freid exhibition of the same name: an unfinished 3D model of *RMB City* in wood and plastic, digital prints and a video promoting the island in SL (http://www.lombard-freid.com/artist_lg_image.php?id=1767). As stated earlier, the island is a collage of urban, cultural and historical elements in present-day China, treated with a mix of *neo-baroque* spirit and post-modern pastiche of archetypical components from today's Asian mass media culture. On Lombard-Freid's website a video clip⁵⁵ shows the construction of *RMB City* in accelerated stop-motion and one observes:

a flying Panda and a statue of a gesticulating Mao half sunk in the harbor, to landmarks of both Chinese history and its frantic recent development. High-rise structures are jammed together, factory chimneys spew fire, Tiananmen Square has become a swimming pool, the Three Gorges Dam is a giant fountain, and Beijing's China Central Television building is suspended above it all by a crane. (Heartney 165 208)

At this 2007 exhibition, the installation was presented as a real-estate office selling diverse tracts of 'land', buildings and parts of *RMB*, the idea being that patrons of *RMB* could take out a two-year lease (open to renewal) on elements from the city, to be paid in *AL* money:

In many ways, *Second Life* is the ultimate fulfillment of some of postmodern theory's more provocative formulations—for instance, it offers a remarkably convincing version of Baudrillard's simulacrum, a condition in which the 'real' dissolves into an abstract network of signs. Similarly, postmodernism's much touted notion of the self as a social construction becomes literal here, as people assemble their avatars from a variety of characteristics available in the virtual marketplace, transforming identity into pure commodity. (Heartney 208)

A few years later in 2011, China Tracy had her fourth solo exhibition at Lombard-Freid Projects, this time exhibiting a new body of work called *Play Time*, which consisted of three related pieces:

⁵⁵ http://www.lombard-freid.com/artist_lg_image.php?id=1767

1. *Shadow Life*: This piece involves three narratives—*A Rock, Dictator, Transmigration*—applying Chinese shadow theatre techniques referencing the Spring Festival celebration that was broadcast yearly on China’s Central Television. Although the stories are based on fairy tales, oriental philosophy and social references, there is a mysterious quality and subversive connotations to the hand gestures, which leave viewers unsettled.

2. *East Wind*: The British cartoon character Thomas the Tank “is superimposed on the front of a Chinese-manufactured Dong Feng truck (literally ‘East Wind’ truck), which barrels across urban highways and overpasses with a single mission: to deliver refuse from a construction site in the city to a trash dump on its outskirts.” The title references Mao Zedong’s Third Front Strategy, which sought to build industrial installations in China to protect it from foreign powers invading. There is a short film plays out metaphors and comments on social commentary, popular aesthetics, documentary conventions all with references to Surrealism.

3. *PostGarden* draws upon various icons of popular culture and cartoon imagery from the popular children’s show Teletubbies and In the Night Garden prodcast on BBC in the 1980s and 2002 respectively. Having no dialogue, these characters successfully transcended language and borders and were broadcasted all over the world. (Yaxuan)

Along with the above three series, Cao had placed a wooden urban model—a kind of skate park—in the central of the gallery, recalling *RMB City* in SL and wooden Thomas the Train play sets. The buildings in the model referenced ancient civilisations from various parts of the world. Visitors could sit, place their fingers on the skateboards and glide them over the buildings and ruins.

Play Time is apparently ‘simple’ on the surface yet complex on the underbelly: the viewers are introduced to a ‘place’ that cannot be distinguished clearly so one must negotiate with a limited sense of factual reality and, in so doing, create an expanded understanding of urban space, the centrality of which is embraced in depth in Cao’s work, albeit with a playful spirit. Cao Fei appropriates symbols from international popular culture (shadow puppetry, Thomas the Train, Igglepiggle and Upsy Daisy) to execute her plasticity, presenting a double position: one of resistance to the value system and the ideologies represented within, and the other a playful evocation of the current conditions of contemporary digital aesthetics in the world—a real convergence of fantasy and reality. In this regard Zhang Yuxuan affirms that:

Play Time perpetuates the open space created in RMB City, which offers a mode and mentality for more people to enjoy and participate in. ... In this rapidly modernizing world, there are fewer and fewer buildings representative of ancient civilizations. ... the sensation of her works ... reflects an accumulated energy of life experiences ... [which] shapes her observation to this world and her interpretation on the power and relationship in the age of globalization, as well as the realities, details and mysteries of being. Through this process, she imagines the possible forms of freedom and seeks an open dialogue with the viewer. (Yaxuan http://www.lombard-freid.com/onview_content_frameset.php?id=138)

During my research on *RMB City* and *Play Time*, both my SL avatar Lacan Galicia and I were in awe of the similarities between *Play Time* and Jacques Tati's 1967 *Playtime* (yes, the same title!). I came to relate these artworks through the centrality that architectural, urbanised and designed space, along with its profound impact in the existential relationship to human spirit (and affective spheres) and the narratives that *transmediate* all these symbols, play in the work of both creators. My focus is on the aesthetic preoccupations and goals, the narrative and visual resources, and the symbols used by both, the artist and director.

Tati's *Playtime* uses essentially the same aesthetic subjects and social critique as in Cao's work, as well as the same process of making the city a protagonist or *visible* character in the plot of the piece. Finally, Tati and Cao Fei share an obsessive perfection applied to the last detail of every element (visually, architectonically and cinematically). In a short film titled *Au-delà de Play Time*⁵⁶ [sic] (a sort of 'the making of' for the set of Tati's *Playtime*) one sees buildings being erected and then tragicomically falling, similar to what Lacan Galicia observed in the factory-building section of Cao's *RMB City*. In Tati's *Playtime* one hardly notices that the city's buildings are in reality life-size *maquettes*, so big and expensive that in fact the set was built as an entire city (*Tativille*) over three years, with an always-insufficient budget. *Tativille* is a fake ultramodern Paris of the future in which buildings and skyscrapers look suspiciously alike and are, in fact, virtually the same one or two modules. Of course Tati made arrangements to have all of

⁵⁶ A fragment with the scene can be viewed at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNTJoCGxeeY&feature=related>

this filmed and visually registered: in *Au-delà...* one sees workers moving parts of buildings by crane or hand and, at the end of the video, tearing them down in all their majestic artificiality. The last sequence of *Au delà...* is pure poetry: Tati, brilliant director that he is, gesticulates and gaits in the characteristic manner of Monsieur Hulot⁵⁷, and then jumps away quickly to escape one of his huge buildings falling on him, a heavy piece of fake reality falling to its demise. In a genius metaphor confirming Tati's incredible gift for visual gags, he mocks the irony of almost being flattened by a piece of heavy painted cardboard fakeness representing modernity. With this gesture, one might say that Tati acknowledges that in a "rapidly modernizing world, there are fewer and fewer buildings representative of ancient civilizations" (Yaxuan).

In one of my favourite scenes in the film, Barbara (an American tourist photographing the city) tries, unsuccessfully, to take a picture of 'Paris' (represented by an old lady selling flowers on the corner—a true Parisian souvenir!). Not having any luck, she then walks into a building and, with her, the viewers vaguely see a poster on the glass wall displaying an image of a building that is very similar to the one she just walked into (if not the same one), but with an image of a traditional red double-decker bus, below which is a typographic message reading "Fly to London". Barbara looks disconcerted; she feels she has seen the building a minute ago. As she walks outside, our gaze follows her to the street corner where she looks over the city, and, as if it were pulled out from an SL avatar's inventory pane, one sees it: the same building one or two blocks behind. At that precise moment a traditional green Parisian bus (of the time) stops at a red light at the corner thereby creating a visual composite with that very building behind creating, thanks to Tati's placement of the camera, another poster but this time the size of the movie screen in which the only lacking element would be the tag line "Fly to Paris".

⁵⁷ Monsieur Hulot represents the average citizen, an old-fashion gentleman very sloppy and distracted, he always looks 'lost'; in the quest of unexpectedly resolve simple situations by chance and a nice smile and basic good old-fashion manners. In many ways he is Tati's quintessential creation and alter ego, around whom, he made several films.

5.2.4 The Unbearable Lightness of Artificiality: Gulliver Hovers Over Laputa, the Khan Visits Invisible Cities, and China Tracy Orbits RMB City

RMB City hovers above a (virtual) sea, much the same way Laputa does, the flying island described by Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's 1726 famous novel *Gulliver's Travels*. In Swift's story Laputa's capital Lagado is an academic city with a highly-structured hierarchy of wise men and clerics ruling it, the rest of the inhabitants being servants. The wise upper class at the Grand Academy of Lagado has but one activity: 'playing' with a writing machine, a mechanical device fed by combined numbers and words. They devote their days to cultivating a utopia through a quasi-religious, cultural and social concern with words, numbers, symbols and permutations, a utopia that inevitably fails due to the preposterous nature of their inventions. With this symbol, Swift mocks the Royal Society, the precursor of which was the *Invisible College*, (founded in the mid seventeenth century), today known as Britain's Academy of Sciences. The Society's common theme was to acquire knowledge through experimental investigation.

Florian Cramer makes an interesting point regarding this linguistic-literary machine in his book *Words Made Flesh*: he explains that some correspondence between the founders of the Royal Society (Robert Boyle, astronomer and Lullist⁵⁸ mathematician John Wilkins, and Johan Valentin Andreae's correspondent Samuel Hartlib, among others) would demonstrate that:

Lullist combinatorics was indeed a major subject of discussion and occupation in the *Invisible College*. Almost one century later, Swift writes a relationalist satire on what he perceives to be the speculative fancy of Lullism in academia. The chapter also mocks a universal language project in which words, i.e. abstract symbols, are replaced with concrete things, a parody, as it seems, on

⁵⁸ "The *Ars* [by 14th Century Catalan monk Ramon Llull or Raimundo Lullus] is shorthand for a formal-computational system of composing and deriving philosophical-theological statements Llull laid out in two books, *Ars generalis ultima* (1305) and, in shorter version, *Ars brevis*. The roots of the Llull's ars [Lullism] lie in a mystical revelation in 1265 on mount Randa on the island of Mallorca. During this event God allegedly revealed his own attributes to Llull. In the ars, these nine attributes are systematized and indexed with letters from B-K as follows: B—*bonitas* (goodness), C—*magnitudo* (magnitude), D—*duratio* (duration), E—*potestas* (power), F—*spaiencia* (wisdom), G—*voluntas* (will), H—*virtus* (virtue), I—*veritas* (truth) and K—*Gloria* (glory)" (Cramer 36).

pictorial universal languages as they were envisioned by Campanella, Andreae and Comenius... (Cramer 60-61)

The Lagado writing machine promises to transform the mechanical, combinatorial capacity in a radical way so that even “the most ignorant person at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labor, may write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, law, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study” (Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, cited in Cramer 60). This transformational power is analogically present in some *RMB City* scripts and coded items, such as riding a Swan while interacting with one of the feng shui gourds in the video *Qi of RMB*, for example. Gulliver is a foreign visitor observing everything in order to report it all, much the same way Marco Polo does in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, narrating the mysterious and unseen places of the empire to Kublai Khan because, old and ill, he is no longer able to visit them himself. However in the case of the latter, the melancholic circumstances of the Khan are not healed by a technical or scientific report of Marco’s incursions into exotic lands, but by means of his imaginative, fantastical and narrative skills in which the exchange of energies and the critical yet pragmatic idea of utopia are the undercurrent themes. The Khan’s spirit is ill, he is sad, and his distress needs to be healed. Perhaps Marco comes to have the same thought as Gulliver: that a magic *stream* of words, stories and images might take the place of duller and scarier images, that they might bring back happiness in the form of new spaces, faces, myths and, above all, descriptions making visible what fundamentally had been dark or simply *invisible*. And indeed, the art within *RMB City* orbits around this dynamic: an affective, magic symbolism triggered by scripts and code in SL.

With this goal in mind, Calvino systematised these operations as an act of the imagination around the syntax of his own aesthetic taste, and what he thought to be the true properties of *visibility*: affective (effective) mirroring, and the subtraction of the weight of things, stories and characters (analogue to Swift’s Lullism). The spiritual warrior’s trip is meant to favour an initiatory trip about which one only knows the departures, not the returns, as evident in the fifty five cities described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan. Because the Khan feels that the game is about visionary possibilities, I have

opened Section 2 with his and Marco's voices (see the quote below the title), which, I believe, provide cues to my analogy of Cao Fei's *RMB City*, as well as the works of Tati.

I was not surprised to see that Cao Fei had quoted, in the first lines of the *RMB City* manifesto, almost the same words uttered by Marco Polo. Independent of the picturesque coincidence, what really matters is the philosophical depth and the concepts, images and metaphors exquisitely applied throughout the *RMB* period. Cao Fei opens *RMB City's* manifesto with that particular quote because, I believe, she is committed to organising the fate of RMB City as if it were a metaphorical 'throw' of the tarot cards, the intricate and allegorical deciphering of which is China Tracy's mission, while your avatar is tele-transported for the first time down synthetic and buoyant highways to *RMB City*. Finally the semi-esoteric fate of *RMB City* connects with its role as a cultural hub and centre for the diffusion and support of virtual and contemporary art. These institutions, in recent years, have become determinant in the reorientation of socio political decisions in China. This is the kind of collective, intellectual and plastic enterprise that can be harvested in the symbiotic relationship between places like *RMB City*, *Immersiva* or *Odyssey* (just to mention but a few in the *metaverse*) and theory, analysis and curatorial centres, as well as art institutions in the real world.

5.3 Concluding Remarks

Since a multifaceted approach is a core element in the aesthetics of *RMB City*, I developed a framework that synthesises: a) the power of words—poetic, oneiric and magical 'actions' to animate things (whether natural or artificial) via script; b) the role of computation as art, that is, the humanising yet magical applied science aimed at the power of words; and c) the cultural transformative forces at play when these narratives become performed in the virtual, the real and, particularly, the in between.

This is ostensibly the analytical line I have followed in search of common paths in the respective approach to digital aesthetics applied to each of the artists in my case studies. A further and deeper explanation of these will be developed in the next Chapter, the Conclusions of this thesis. My claim for now is that Cao Fei's aesthetic and artistic goals are sustained in the idea that the artist and his/her iconic representation is the first

outcome of an artist's endeavours. In other words, Cao Fei, via China Tracy, has achieved something rare and remarkable these days, gaining the attention and consideration of both the specialised art world as well as the public. The educated and qualified interlocutors (curators, art critics, gallery merchants, chairs of cultural institutions and theorists) join the public to look at her work and to alter the images, transforming the blend into an intangible virtual 'material' with which she works artistically. On the other hand, building a permanently mutable and evolving 'city' in the *metaverse* to enhance the 'virtual' cultural industries in both the real and the virtual worlds—hosting, performing, exhibiting, and 'leasing' to art and cultural entities and corporations—speaks to Cao's entrepreneurial, media-savvy approach to art creation.

From this perspective, my claim is that the manner in which Cao Fei, Jacques Tati and Italo Calvino proceed can be seen, despite their different eras, as a 'merging' of one's symbolism into the other. Indeed, their goals as artists are (were) different, as was their context, and yet, the three of them depart from (and in some ways arrive at) a *common* denominator: the anguish, alienation and *anomie* that contemporary humans experience in their relation to hyper technologised urban societies. The common motive is relatively simple: the upset of simple men and women waking up to the utopian dream of current techno societies (dominated by war economy, networked digital communication and surveillance technologies), their lives filled with smart digital gadgets, hyper text tools, and ubiquitous networked devices connected 24/7, but also filled with alienation, depersonalisation, solitude and spiritual void.

Such distress and melancholy lead to looking for ways of resistance: aesthetics, imagination and fantasy as 'healing' tools; remedying afflicted souls and hearts through *play*; vicarious avatar experiences in one's *other* life; psychic energy and 'magic' distributed by the powers of code (which is the conception of magic in the context of this dissertation)... All of these contribute to resisting and challenging, creatively, the fatal inevitability of the current sordid, dull and anomic times. This perhaps explains why happiness, innocence and utopia are themes so often critically and humouristically entertained in the three artworks.

5.4 Links and SLURLs

China Tracy's RMB City SLURL

<http://slurl.com/secondlife/RMB%20City%201/154/33/126>

The birth of RMB City (Lombard-Freid Gallery, single channel video)

http://www.lombard-freid.com/artist_lg_image.php?id=1767

China Tracy interviewed by Leesa Fanning Spiritweaver (YouTube) part 1/5

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRivPJZPrRo&feature=share&list=PL48AD977B9913AE3E>

Live in RMB City YouTube clip

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61k679iP2xU&feature=share&list=PL48AD977B9913AE3E>

Jacques Tati, Au dela de Playtime

<http://youtu.be/NNTJoCGxeeY>

Jacques Tati, A Little Lost - Play Time (1/4) Movie CLIP (1967) HD

<http://youtu.be/UgSGkDm8KMs>

Jacques Tati, Modern Apartments - Play Time (2/4) Movie CLIP (1967) HD

<http://youtu.be/lv9pdyuYWIw>

Jacques Tati Playtime - Trailer

<http://youtu.be/ZO3SIkso0QQ>.

Chapter 6

6 Conclusions – Overview

The Conclusions begin with the outline of the four *aesthetic vectors*, identified as the ‘direct’ outcome of each artist’s *modus operandi* and his or her respective *mythopoeia*. These two terms are explained in detail, evoking Heidegger’s notion of *mythos* and *tekhne* borrowed from the documentary *The Ister*. This is followed by a summary of findings, remarks and highlights on each case study.

In each artist’s Chapter, the evidence and examination of the four case studies provide ground for a multidisciplinary examination of SL, from virtual aesthetics, new media, and online networked digital technologies. As mentioned in the Introduction, the patterns intertwining visibility, narrative and technological mediation as foreseen by (among others) Italo Calvino have served the purpose of analysing how subjectivity and artistry ‘work’ when artists project themselves as an avatar embodying auto-empathy, unstable and flickering identity, and narrative and subjective mythmaking.

Common denominators between the four cases are commented on in the summary of findings, highlights and remarks. There is a notorious tendency to make tangible and visible the exceptional capacity to create and consolidate an affective being (with his or her own personality, identity and history) that virtual environments such as Second Life propel. This is reflected in how the four artists dialogue with their avatars and the public (first), and produce œuvre around a common fact: that art creation in current online digital times favours and enhances the exchange of aesthetic experiences. This stems from a remarkable paradox: instead of dematerialisation and disappearance of the body, it is really “materialised”, enlarged and enhanced through information aesthetics and what Munster calls a space of reciprocity (2006).

In other words the augmentation and reconstitution of embodiment patterns, based on new arrangements of real data, results in the virtual becoming a non-excludent functional articulation. Concurrently, it creates meaning, circulating it, and, as an effect of these,

reinvents notions about virtual existence and contributes to the general theories of virtual worlds at large.

The Chapter ends with a brief comment on SL economy, Linden Labs Scripting Language, and how these are related to art production as a possible line for future research in the field.

6.1 Without Stones There Is No Arch: Lack of Human Breath, *The Ister* and the Essence of Technology

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone. “But which is the stone that supports the bridge?” Kublai Khan asks. “The bridge is not supported by one stone or another,” Marco answers, “but by the line of the arch that they form.” Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: “Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.” Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.” (Calvino 1974 82)

First, a clarification: throughout my thesis I have referred to the artist’s *modus operandi* and *mythopoeia*, which are more precisely, myth creation in the aesthetic sense. By these I mean the artist’s ‘mode’ of assuming, first, their position as creator and the rather subjective way in which each artist sees and recognises him or herself as an *actant* capable of self-perception, and of crafting narrative and factual meaning (from both *memory* and *technique*). I have applied the meaning and connection between *mythos* and *tekhne* as discussed in the documentary film *The Ister* (2004) based on Heidegger’s lectures of 1942, which were in turn centred on Hölderlin’s poem of the same name. The poem is about the Danube river, which runs from Romania to the Black Forest in Germany, itself a country that is both the heart of the new Europe and the ghost of the old one. Heidegger takes up themes from Hölderlin’s poem: those of home and place, culture and memory, and technology and ecology—all issues that beckon us still today in a mediated world that includes SL. In general terms, *tekhne* means knowledge, know-how or art (in the *metier* sense), and *mythos* is assumed not just in its conventional sense of *maetier* and the beliefs about certain reality (i.e. literary fiction), but more in the sense of an intimate, magic and subjective aim, a technical arrangement of images, words, poetry and language bound to preserve and transmit certain explanations of things. Philosopher narrators Stiegler and Lacoue-Labarthe both agree that Heidegger’s more accurate sense

of *tekhne* equates to that of “knowing how to obtain from *physis* (nature) what it does not offer by itself” (Barison 01:31:52):

it is not a matter of replacing one mythology with another. It consists precisely in substituting *mythos* with *logos*. Now, if one has *logos* in the place of *mythos*, this does not mean you have a new *mythos* but ... a disappearance of *mythos*, and a promotion of *tekhne*. ... In the world of *mythos*, there is no separation between *physis* and *tekhne*. In the world of *logos*, *physis* and *tekhne* are separated. And *tekhne*, essentially, is that which has no end. (Barison 01:30:47)

Stiegler then refers to his own book *Technics and Time*, the thesis of which is that *technics* constitutes the horizon of human existence, a fact that has been omitted from the history of philosophy, which operates on the basis of a distinction between *episteme* and *tekhne*. This means that the genesis of *technics* has become temporarily separated from what is called human.

I have reflected on this idea throughout the examination of SL-based artwork, the artists, and their avatars in my case studies. The repercussions are poignant and form the foundation of many of the digital culture and technology sources followed in this work. For instance, when Stiegler declares that “technics develops faster than culture” (Barison 00:09:04) so that “man [sic] is nothing other than technical life” (00:10:12), he is talking about the technicisation of the living: time, the historical duration of technological cycles, and their acceleration and historical gaps. The main effect of modern hyper acceleration is the crunch of space and time carried out in (and by) civilisation.

This points to the problematic relation of human subjectivity to a symbiotic connection with ‘machine subjectivity’ via code, software and interaction, as outlined by a number of theorists in Chapter 1. Stiegler emphasises the idea that if something is properly human, it is due to the conquest of mobility (both in material and spiritual sense), and this is *tekhne*: the pursuit of life by means other than life—in other words, technology is an externalisation process of inner aim and knowledge.

These ideas are highly related to Munster’s thesis around the shift from spatial to temporary regimes of perception that digital aesthetics and technology produce. A few other important concepts entertained in the film *The Ister* may be seen as antecedents in

the genealogy of the digital, also explaining the Western binary split imposed between computing, on the one hand, assumed as a branch or technical domain ruled *only* by a narrow scientific rationality, and, on the other, assumed as a socio-cultural, multidisciplinary dynamic of civilisation's development, in which technology, science, art and humanities become interwoven (although that does not imply transparent dialogue or even balance).

Thus, Munster points to the insolubility (in fact, re-materialisation) of the body immersed in digital and information aesthetics (her thesis in *Materialising New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*), where one must acknowledge the constitutive characteristics of “temporal and *topological* propensities of information visualization” (Munster 179), and the production of differentials via network interaction in distributed aesthetics. In a similar sense, the above can be related to Campanelli's conception of blob theory⁵⁹:

In ‘blob modeling’, architecture and interactivity are connected and amalgamated to give rise to a spatial dynamism with different qualities to those related solely to the architectural building itself. The result is new forms and aesthetics, capable of developing not only in the field of architecture *strictu sensu*, but also in design, computer graphics and web interfaces. The concept of ‘blob’ does not only connote a new approach to design, however; it also captures the peculiarity of contemporary society. (Campanelli 221)

I have borrowed Campanelli's idea that “the whole of contemporary society is a huge, shapeless blob” (Campanelli 222). In fact, SL is a good example verifying this: a conflation of architectural spaces, media, art and entertainment systems, in which hybrid fluid malleable space and beings made of data, mutually adapt their temporal or transitional shapes, responding to and rearranging a permanent flow (of data) ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the system, inevitably blurring the boundaries in the process.

In this fashion one may say (especially in light of Stiegler's remarks) that identity and the subjectivity of virtual beings are permutable, to some extent one and the same *as another* because SL's ‘technicality’ facilitates a fluid and uninterrupted mutability among them.

⁵⁹ As introduced by American architect Greg Lynn in a 1996 article entitled “Blobs (or Why Tectonics is Square and Topology is Groovy)” (Campanelli 221).

In this condition one needs—says Campanelli—an analysing model that helps clarify, update and understand the man-machine interaction involved in the creative process. The combined research method in this thesis is pointed towards that frontier.

I estimate, here, that a tentative media studies perspective applied to the examination of four artists' work in my case studies may contribute to such a multidisciplinary model. Campanelli relates it to the theories of Italian philosopher Mario Costa in *Dimenticare L'Arte* (Forget About Art): Costa claims the arts constitute an aestheticisation of technology so that artistic subjectivity becomes extended to mingle with machinic process. He postulates three ages: Technical Arts, Technological Arts and Neo-Technological Arts. SL-based art, as a part of the broader field of electronic interactive virtual arts (Grau), belongs to the third category. This implies something that has been written often in this thesis, that these forms of fluid, metamorphic, networked digital art operate through *blocs* of sensation (Deleuze) as well as hyper mediation, narrative, hyper text and dual subjectivity. The artworks also carry traces of older media and previous (yet still influential) post-modern theories on culture, science and society, which illustrate the unbalanced relationship between technique and culture. This, of course, is characteristic of the hybridisation of media and information in the mid to late twentieth century art. "As Costa observes: 'The previously dominating position of the 'subject' is replaced by the 'languages' and the 'text'" (Campanelli 225).

The idea of "an aesthetics of the object and the self-operating machine" is the key to a new arrangement of enhanced and extended consciousness on the *human-hyper subjective* amalgamated to *machinic subjectivity*, "of which interactive practices typical of new media and the communicational dynamics induced by the digital networks are the first signs" (225). The artwork Lacan Galicia was able to appreciate, interact with and experience via the case studies in this research show the degree to which individual subjectivity has been updated to an enhanced version of the "technological hyper-subject" Campanelli returns to Costa's theory:

the belief that contemporary subjectivity is *connected to* and *depends on* digital networks: the contemporary hyper-subject is made up of human and machinical/technological components, including the ... protocols, processes and

the hardware and software platforms regulating the functioning of digital networks. Networking, as a cultural practice based on making networks, is a multiplication of identities, roles and methods no longer built exclusively on human beings but also on non-living beings and relevant topologies and physiologies. (Campanelli 226)

The summary of findings about the work of Eva and Franco Mattes, Gazira Babeli, Bryn Oh and China Tracy endeavours to relate the above matters to the framework of theories and the experiences collected in the case studies. Stiegler provides an interesting approach to the work these artists have produced during their time in SL: that the role of technology has been suppressed throughout the history of philosophy and art (as organised inorganic matter), and that technology is a form of memory constitutive of human temporality. This suggests that *tekhne* moves faster than culture: Western thought had only recently acknowledged (from the mid nineteenth century onwards) that the essence of reality is not stability but rather change, revolution and dynamism. Stability, therefore, is the exception. Stiegler says that culture as we know it shall be described as the transmission through technics “in essence technics is memory-support. This means technics is the condition of the constitution of the relation to the past” (Barison 00:40:16).

What is exemplary in each artwork examined in the case studies is they cannot be removed from a continual stream of a fluid compositional strategy in the hands (minds, eyes, metabolism and digital skills) of the artist. Second, it is clear that what makes these works truly interactive is the people who look at them, ‘read’ them, enjoy them, decipher and penetrate them online, within SL, or in hybrid modalities as one has seen in the works of Gazira Babeli and the Mattes principally. In agreement with the concern manifested by the philosophers in *The Ister*, the allocation (most importantly at the level of the symbolic) of a *space* in human experience within the ‘digital as art’—stemming from an interactive networked environment like SL—would indicate that ‘technicality’ and *mythopoeia* amalgamate in a more or less natural modality, which anyone can access via two processes: *machinic subjectivity* and *the hyper technological subjective*.

6.2 Dual Subjectivities and the Technological Hyper-Subject

For Campanelli, Munster, Cramer and other theorists and art critics like Groys, computer machine-code and software occupy a central role as protagonists in the cultural and socio

political changes in life of the past decades. This understanding comes from the acknowledgment that digital communication technology has the potential not just to reshape communication patterns, but, essentially, affect human subjectivity and identity with its hyper accelerated speed. Through the properties of digital imaging and processing, it contributes to the reconfiguration of our epistemologies of the digital, virtual, socially networked, hyper-mediated, etc. When they are seen from the current blurred-boundaries context of *tekhne* and *episteme*, meaningful and common characteristics surface in the four cases: first, the use of the avatar as a symbolic yet determinant instrument in the creation and proliferation of meaning and art-meaning; second, the idea of an enhanced or extended subjectivity is reconfigured and reified; third, subjectivity becomes *processus* experienced as the transfers between intra-to-inter subjective paths, to build a feasible artistic character in a virtual narrative. A case in point are the characters Bryn Oh and China Tracy, the former as an artist only known in SL, the latter performing a symbiotic personality and ‘prestigious’ image as a renowned contemporary artist supported by two bodies and their respective identities, one in the virtual world, one in the actual. Or, in an extended and strategic AL ‘plot’, as the famous, irreverent, challenging, provocative artists such as the Mattes or Gazira Babeli, who have concealed identities permanently in both AL and SL.

Framed as such, it seems to be a real possibility that our quotidian assimilation of the rearrangements of memory, narrative and subjectivity (that rely on instantaneous and massive digital dissemination) contribute to the understanding of contemporary virtual existence. The thesis of Munster and ideas of Cramer (and Campanelli) around code computing as, essentially, a cultural and humanising process, are connected to my observations concerning the artists in this dissertation. They assumed, in SL, the task of tearing down the walls that compartmentalise our perceptions of the virtual from the so-called realistic notion of virtual worlds technology. One filtered by the passivity of consumers’ identity.

6.3 Findings, Remarks and Highlights

To refer to findings related to distributed digital aesthetics, networks (interactive and narrative) in the context of SL-based art in my case studies, I will use the term *vector* in

the same sense Patrick Lichty does in his essay “Art in the Age of DataFlow”. There is also a parallel to Lichty in the concept of *mythmaking*, which for him means “the dialogic narratives of listserves and blogs; and artistic visualizations that seek to reveal patterns as *flows* of information in networked cultures.”⁶⁰ In this sense I have elaborated a brief summary of the characteristics, findings, features and highlights of both the *modus operandi* and *mythopoeia* (as defined above) in every one of the four case studies in this dissertation. At the end of every Chapter I have provided interpretations of the nature and goals of the artist’s exemplary work. In this way I have approached the four artists’ *mode* of proceeding within SL, to examine and delineate a profile of the artist, what I have called the four vectors stemming from examination. They are presented here in the order of the Chapters.

6.3.1 Eva and Franco Mattes’ Narrative Vector: The Politics of Non-Linear Permutation and Identity Hacking. *Why be ourselves when we can be someone else?*

What Lacan Galicia (my avatar) and I obtained through interaction with *Synthetic Performances* (SP) is the awareness that the Mattes’ *modus operandi* implies vast constructions of imaginary: deceptive narratives whose central locus is the inherently unstable idea of *identity*, flickering and, most importantly, open to recursive and iterative chains of ephemeral meaning, through flows of interactive data from virtual-to-real-to-virtual worlds. Their strategies to hack, substitute or invent new identities is dependent on concealing their ‘real’ persona. This is achieved in part thanks to a media-savvy presence and personality, which takes advantage of the distributive dispersion of data via the web and social networks, as well as what I have called the *aestheticising* process (that is, the vivification of their actual synthetic nature, as paradoxical as it may sound).

⁶⁰ “I look at the emergence of nonlinear narrative (1940-2006), using the mathematical terms *scalar*, *vector* and *flow* as conceptual or visual metaphors that describe structure, transmission, and social patterns. *Scalar* examines the set, non-linear narratives of hypermedia and the indeterminate narratives of Wikis; *vector*, the dialogic narratives of listserves and blogs; and artistic visualizations that seek to reveal patterns as *flows* of information in networked cultures increase. These modes of representation, and the artists who exemplify them in this chapter, illustrate the transition from linear to non-linear narrative, the emergence of indeterminate notions of authorship and readership, and the problematic nature of communication and representation in open networks” (Lichty 2008).

In fewer words, what the Mattes achieved with these procedures is the creation of an *artificial reality* in which the media and the networks are committed to rendering the whole process into a ‘true’ event occurring in the metaverse. The real ‘realness’ of these narratives and synthetic artworks remains entropic and therefore their digital distribution assumes the role of a multifunctional myth-making machine. Due to this aspect I have related their work to Groys’ writings on technical reproduction and the loss of aura in digital times. Additionally, the complex question of original and copy in digital realms, as previously mentioned (see Groys’ full note in the Chapter), account for the Mattes’ appropriation and manipulation of virtuality anchored in the issue of original, copy and its reproducibility. The Mattes produce within the larger contexts of art as documentation and documentation as art. Their SL time allowed them to experiment linking digital aesthetic domains with relatively more traditional performance art and appropriation, from the logics of current media spectacularisation and distribution.

The Mattes’ performances as well as re-enactments of others’ work actually suggest the presence of an alternate *ontology* of the digital, as an incessant flux forming part of today’s idea of reality. Last but not least, under Groys’ conception of *biopolitical* art, one could interpret *SP* as one fine example of the digitally fashioned “lifespan” that takes artificiality as its explicit theme (Groys 54-55). The highlight in the work of the Mattes—especially in their recent period—is that digital distribution and networked environments do not neglect nor differentiate between artificial or true ‘signals’. It is media and distributed aesthetics that are the means to expand and enhance a shared perception-contribution of them, blurring the boundaries between appropriation, theft or confiscation (more or less traditional ‘methods’ of an artist’s relationship to identity, content and property of others) from attribution and adjudication (more semantically oriented symbolic processes in the digital flux of today). Quaranta (Attribution) points this out by recounting the famous pranks, thefts and attributions carried out by the Mattes regarding Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan and Swiss artist Dieter Roth’s work. Without such a commitment of the flickering self allocating aesthetic dimension and ‘value’ to the hyper and the machinistic subjective, it would be difficult to grasp a full perspective of the kind of network and media art that the Mattes create.

6.3.2 Gazira Babeli's Code Performances and Narrative Vector: Illusion and Representation Are the True Bearers of Continuity Between Real and Virtual Worlds. *I can walk barefoot but my avatar needs Prada shoes.*

First, a crucial fact: Gazira is an *anomaly* of the system (of art, aesthetics, programming, etc). One doesn't know who is behind the 'female' avatar wearing the tall black hat and sunglasses who likes to be called 'Gaz', but whose identity is unknown in Actual Life. Is there one individual? Several? What gender? Is it a group of genius hackers and pranksters? A cutting edge AI bot disguised as an avatar? I don't have the answers to any of these questions, but one thing is evident: she reveals a mix of dark humour, top-notch programming and technical skills, and a sort of nihilistic-irony disguised as *joie de vivre* in avatarian terms.

In Gazira's Chapter, these questions are addressed as a virtuous-pathos process. The kind of ontologies, myths and teleological assumptions about her (and her horizon as a virtual artist) makes a defined artistic claim in favour of illusion, and therefore magic (that of code, capable of instigating life in the artificial). Gazira emphasises this in its seminal character in the construction of the idea of the real as virtual, only because, through *tekhne* and *episteme*, one is able to elevate an idea of the virtual embedded in the actual. In this regard, Gazira is systematic, ferocious and caustic, and yet cool and funny. So it is thanks to illusion and representation that one senses the virtual as 'real', and vice versa the realness of the virtual is apprehended only through technical representation and cultured illusion, in the sense that our cultured views allow for conferring a certain degree of reality to dreams, fantasies, literature and poetry.

Gazira knows that a number of unresolved paradoxes around perception and interaction with the work of art are there, lurking in the shadows ready to unfold and confuse us with more tempting and self-assuring binaries: embodiment vs digital, real vs virtual, immaterial vs material, actual vs remote, etc. In this sense Gazira's art is a permanent invitation to assume an alternative, more complex and ambiguous *liminal* position. In her work *Acting as Aliens*, visitors are subtly projected to a context in which the only possibility to connect with the (absent but not disembodied) artist is to start acting as an

avatar. People become seduced and follow—at a distance—actions, movements and directions provided by Gazira Babeli. In a genius transference of subjectivities applied to the alternate bodies at play, Gazira accomplishes something fascinating and odd: the people in the (real) gallery are transformed into avatars controlled by a virtual avatar in SL who, at the same time (and hidden somewhere) displays the action to other residents (in SL) and other ‘residents’ in the actual world (in front of the gallery’s computer screen).

This play around the power of scripts and code to symbolically alter the routinary order of references between actants and worlds, represents one of the aesthetic highlights worth mentioning in Gazira’s case. One does not need to escape from the real just because tangible materiality becomes patterned differently through code. Rather, this is an enticing opportunity to experience the extension and re-materialisation of the body in the digital at a symbolic level through the virtual (but real-real as illusion).

Since her time in *Second Front* (2006-07) Gazira was not just aware of the radical, underground and cutting edge art scene that took place in SL in the ‘golden years’ between 2006 and 2010 (Lichty), but also of the cruder and more disturbing economic realities of the SL platform with its handful of millionaires profiting from SL, a small group of *Mafiosi* owners of virtual real state, brothels, casinos, money laundering, and escort businesses. This kind of scope begs a non-linear and cybrid approach to SL art, in such a way that *liminality* becomes transformed into a true aesthetic endeavour across worlds. This is how to interpret Gazira’s emphasis on illusion and representation embedded in her powerful code resources as media artist.

Chapter 3 expands upon Gazira’s use of code and LSL to actually unveil and critically interrogate the peripatetic and at times sad condition of SL users, enslaved by media’s mystification of hyper connectivity and Linden Lab’s pretentious belief that SL is the Web 3.0 of the future. But she does this in a humorous and elegant way, underlining with this aesthetic exchange the fascinating unresolved dialectics between the symbolic reality of virtual objects and an avatar’s real behaviour, whose triggered reactions have repercussions in both planes, the real and the virtual.

As mentioned to Savini in her interview, Gazira says that imaginary realities are part of our deal with the cultured representation of the world and, in this process, digital information has a spontaneous proliferating effect. To me, the most important finding in Gazira's case, is that she assumes the transforming and fluid effect on identity and affective relationship to a (virtual) space (behaviour and objects) activated by code and scripts that serves the purpose of adding the 'player' on the real side of the server-client scheme in the performance of her artwork by taking control of the relationship with the public. Gazira conducts gazes, actions and, to some extent, reactions to her pieces, always with a strategy at hand that confirms what Cramer calls the constructed-cultural functions of computer code. So that is why theorists, artists and curators refer to her as a 'virus', as a contagion and *memetic* master (your avatar's mind is probably your own mind 'talking' to or in-between two bodies, Gazira would say).

In other words, illusion and representation do not neglect the continuity between the virtual and the real; rather, the opposite is true: it underlines it, as long as one transcends techno-centric auto-referential views of digital technology. This the aesthetic lesson from Gazira Babeli.

6.3.3 Bryn Oh's *Machinima* and Unfolding Narrative Vector: An Artist Only Exists on the Internet. *When someone falls in love in SL, they fall in love with another mind, not with a cartoon character.*

The fact that Bryn Oh is a traditionally-trained oil painter explains many of her own obsessions and virtues as a practising SL artist; it also explains the prominence she confers (perhaps without purpose) on *visuality* among other sensorial and perceptual referents. In her interview with Lacan Galicia and on her copiously maintained blogspot, she emphasises the superior, qualitative ranking introduced in art by compositional order. She is able to apply this as a direct outcome of mathematical harmony, which does not imply that she neglects the power of intuition, lyrical spirit and emotional or even dark imagery. Rather the contrary is evident: Bryn is a lonesome character that aesthetically turns the conditions of intimacy, privacy and self-containment (of her personality and temperament) into a powerhouse. She supplies stories that become transformed into

interactive virtual installations, scripted sculptures and *machinima* productions that flirt between private and inner meaning on the one hand, and a shared and collective one on the other.

The first observation is the proliferation of stories that are transformed into plots underlying the spatial and temporal architectural structure of her sets: sculptures, toy-characters, fantastic machines and places built within SL. What Bryn seeks is to share her inner visions, dreams and melancholic imagery through poetic discourse that adopts both visual (three-dimensional and interactive) and textual forms. These modalities are profoundly woven into her delicate yet effective and detailed sense of composition. When one enters Bryn's SIMs, one becomes integrated in the dynamics of a poetic discourse unfolding from the series of objects, characters and situations that open their whole semiotic potential in accordance with one's degree of focus, curiosity and patience. No artist in these case studies can better illustrate the conflation of form, space, mutable semantics and narrative order of fictional myth-making than Bryn Oh. More than looking to anchor our interpretation of her stories, she looks for multiplication and rearrangement of articulations (variations) to which the visitor can connect her own affective receptivity and intellectual interpretation of the performing objects and spaces. In fact her bucolic and morbid atmospheres, so common in her expressive repertoire, are populated by talking and narrative devices, ready to lead the viewer—at the request of the patient and curious visitor—to new levels of interaction and narratives around a number of phantasmagorical and personal subjects: ill robots, rusted machines, abandoned toys, and other infantile items of memory, all melancholic spirits wandering in the dusk or at night on the borders of the real, the virtual and the oneiric.

A second point to highlight concerns the artist's approach to desire, within the oneiric contexts created by her poetry and virtual installations expressed through technical instructions and LSL. The 'centrality' of the gaze is once again underlined, but as noted in Chapter 4 in relation to *Immersiva*, apart from programming and suggesting an 'ideal' trajectory to the visiting avatar, Bryn is more obsessed with the opseoscopic modality this process may adopt, influencing the aesthetic exchange. Bryn's plastic standpoint relies basically on the possibilities of hosting her gaze in the viewer's (via one's avatar and

computer screen), and by this procedure she takes partial control of a narrowed number of trajectories and findings that an avatar might discover on her sites. Notable, in this regard, is the radical indifference of the artist to intents of differentiation between her sculptures, interventions in the space and (or) a more systematic architectural structuring. What really matters, Bryn seems to say, is the poetic continuity, the fluid stream of narrations threading, intersecting or recomposing each other, as one has experienced in dreams, creative epiphanies and fantastic day-dreaming.

The third remark is connected to the previous one: precisely because Bryn intensively assumes the preservation of a poetic and literary continuity, the visitor needs to *relocate* herself towards the intermedial entangle of sensorial and affective processes in which the lyrical and mysterious spirit of Bryn, the oil painter-artist, will seek to bring your avatar inside the painting through fully calculated harmonious mathematic and geometrical patterns; while, at the same time, Bryn the skilful computer animation artist, strives for your patience, curiosity and constant feedback, in order to put in motion the kind of plots that are best perceived in task-oriented action, like in film structure. That is why it is pointless (and certainly difficult) to remain contained just in her SL SIMS without turning attention to her blogspot, YouTube and Flickr channels, and *machinima* creations. In the case studies, the relevance of a smart and effective media and social networks integration in aesthetic discourse is a common factor to the four artists, although in this regard Bryn's *modus operandi* is exemplary; a simple and powerful way of achieving inter-mediated attention.

Because of this, and the fact that Bryn's sites work as fictional hubs (or invisible /visible cities), an analogy can be traced to the works of Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni and Italian fiction writer Italo Calvino. It is not gratuitous that one of the most important acknowledgements to Bryn's work comes from English film director and visual artist Peter Greenaway, with whom Bryn collaborated not long ago.

My final remark concerns the opseoscopic and opseographic role of the optical devices stemming from her *machinima*, performance, and installation work. I refer to the beautifully transformed incursions in her spaces, which avatars experience when

interacting with them. Bryn's *mythopoeia*, and the involved visiting avatars witness these fantastic places and become immersed in them. Due to the virtuosity of their formal and painterly treatment, they become empowered to 'see' their own role through poems, interactive play and general cinematics that Bryn's pieces entail, making them recognise themselves as accomplices and integrating part of the pieces. This shared plasticity is what connects the experiences to Rancière's term the *fate of the image*, which in Bryn's case seems to condemn images to fabricate their own reality through illusion, fragmentation and multiplicity. After all, in Bryn's places, that is what people as avatars do: interplay with the fate of (digital) images in the process of becoming something else. Like the audience in *Blow Up* or the readers of Calvino, the creation of para-oneiric environments populated by images, allegories and programmed interactivity turn Bryn Oh's installation into a preferred arena for experimentation with transferences between the actual or real subjectivity behind the avatar, and Bryn's avatar whose task is to metaphorically and momentarily take control of ones (avatar's) gaze and immerse one in what she proposes. This is the intimate power of relating words and image in a motional and fictive scenario that can also become animated by the magic of scripted instructions. Bryn's vector is the ability to implicate the viewer in her own plot or *mythopoeia*, by providing narrative lines to which the visitor (user) may append her own subjectivity and proceed to find (via interactivity) deeper levels of interaction hidden from the surface. This, in itself, is a metaphor of Bryn's capacity to generate fable while maintaining a central plot where everything connects. As Bryn eloquently affirmed to me in the interview: her audience is *the kind of people who have the patience and curiosity to look beneath rocks in awe, looking beyond the secret life of bugs*. This is Bryn's definition of immersion.

6.3.4 China Tracy's Visible and Invisible Narrative Vector: RMB Is a Virtual City that Models Chinese Cities of the Future. *To go virtual is the only way to forget the real darkness.*

How are spiritual energies, religious and mystic traditions with the anomie and distressing time of current urban and westernised China, reconciled particularly from the dominion of the virtual? China Tracy has created *RMB City* not so much with the aim of responding to this challenge, but with the more tangential and humouristic purpose of

allegorically and collectively creating a global hallucination in RMB City (translated as Money Town), the urban, communication networked model for the Chinese city of the future. The thing that stands out in China Tracy's case is the global scope of her aesthetic discourse around *utopian* views of the city as a multidimensional place in which everything occurs that is relevant for the modern, free-spirits of (the country of) China's younger generations. In Chapter 5, influences around the concept of *utopia* from visual, film and literary domains are outlined.

Analogical paths lead to the work of French film director Jacques Tati, as well as Italian writer Italo Calvino. The first highlight of the Chapter is the introduction of China Tracy's own kind of Lagado writing machine, applying the analogy from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in which the flying Island of Laputa and its capital city Lagado are ruled by an academic theocracy. One is seduced by China Tracy's multiple roles on the fantastic island of RMB, by the same insinuation that the Lagado Writing Machine—which promises to transform people into spiritual higher ranking artists, writers and intellectuals—is a metaphor for China's memories of its communist past. There is an additional rationale for the analogy to Swift's novel, also borrowed from Cramer: the hermetic and mystic disciplines of the seventeenth century, like Lullism for example. In one of the many incursions by Lacan Galicia in RMB, he enjoyed: riding a Swan and having his own sacred copy of the *Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra* (the Diamond Sutra) from the bodhisattva's right eye, as both a blessing to the city, and an inquiry into religion itself; interacting with feng shui esoteric properties of the gourds of Qi; and reaping the therapeutic powers of dancing with Carl Marx near the Forbidden City. This kind of magic is the second highlight.

The third highlight deals with Cramer as well. It seeks to emphasise the common element among my case studies and artists, around the magic and power of code to influx life in the artificial. China Tracy's work excels in this terrain. The argument in the Chapter on her claims that the transformational power of the utopian (and bogus Lagado machine) is mocked and ironically re-enacted by Cao Fei in relation to domestic Chinese matters.

The fourth remark points to the role and ambitious scope of RMB City within the concept of the ample and successful artistic career of Cao Fei in the actual world. Cao and China Tracy are two identities, appearances and bodies of the same mind: unlike the other artists in my case studies, Cao emphatically pronounces herself for a continuity between worlds. In this sense, no one in this dissertation makes a better planned, systematised and effective (and affective) use of *liminality* than Cao Fei. This factor traces analogies to film, the city as utopia and the city as narrative. Particularly important is the similarity between Cao's hyper-educated design and visual arts eye and Calvino's ontology around the properties of visibility: affective (effective) mirroring, and the subtraction of the weight of things, stories and characters. In the Chapter, I affirm that this, in Calvino, may have traces analogous to Swift's Lullism. It is no wonder that at the opening of RMB city, in its manifesto, Cao Fei makes reference to Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, paraphrasing the Khan. Cao's game is all about visionary possibilities.

Last but not least, the key in Cao's multidisciplinary art in SL is sorted around the framework of synthesising: the power of words—poetic, oneiric and magical 'actions' to animate things (whether natural or artificial) via script and code; the role of computation as art, that is, the humanising yet magical applied science aimed at the power of words; and the cultural transformative forces at play when these narratives become performed in the virtual, the real and, particularly, the in-between.

Cao Fei gains the attention of both the specialised art world as well as the world public due to the freshness, intense sincerity and naiveté of her impeccably coded work in SL. This also speaks of Cao's contemporary and successful understanding of the entrepreneurial, media-savvy dimension that art creation requires these days to contest and possibly remediate (although partially) the anguish, alienation, *anomie* and upset of simple men and women waking up to the utopian dream of current techno societies and seeing their lives filled with both powerful technologies and spiritual void. This perhaps explains why happiness, innocence and utopia are themes so often critically and humouristically entertained in Cao Fei's artwork.

6.4 Is SL Just a High-Yield Investment Program or a Ponzi Scheme? Linden Scripting Language, *Odyssey* and *Immersiva*

Lacan Galicia (my avatar) spent around 500 hours in SL from November 2009 to January 2012, most of the time visiting *Immersiva*, *Odyssey* and a few places operated by Western University and the Faculty of Information and Media Studies. The collected impressions, images, conversations and interviews lead me to the conclusion that it is difficult to say what the nature and/or future of SL might be. To be brief, the sensation of solitude is increasing: the divide between those who know how to build and sell, script and animate, and therefore have a more discerning point of entry to the understanding of interactive and aesthetic possibilities keeps steadily growing. SL is currently a sort of lonely place in which finding other avatars and people of similar interests is not the rule but the exception. The exception to this is, of course, at gambling sites, malls, discotheques and virtual brothels that, according to a formidable investigation posted in “Capitalism 2.0” (Randolfe), control SL’s economy.

That means that the predominant ethos in current SL is dictated by speculative economy schemes against which cultural and artistic enterprises in SL have a heroic mission: to preserve the vast areas of experimental, educational and aesthetic exchange. Economy in SL has been analysed and discussed since its beginning, notably the hype around the 2006-07 blob about doing socio-culturally important activities on its platform, but it seems to have also steadily decayed. In Randolfe’s investigation (2009) it is not suggested that the technical evolution of SL’s interface and the growing sophistication of other connected network services and their tools made the learning curve steeper than it used to be between 2006-08. While it is beyond the scope and qualifications of this document, it is an area of immense concern for art and artists in the metaverse.

Another topic not addressed here is that of Linden Scripting Language, which for its particular technical characteristics merits a specialised review by academics and virtual worlds researchers experienced in the area. Throughout this thesis, when I speak of code I mean binary logics across technical platforms. When I speak of script or programming, however, I mean (and the reader must keep this in mind) indistinctly LSL or other event-

driven scripting language. And here I refer to the kind of SLs that work as FSMs (Finite-State Machine) due to the small memory required to handle operations, actions and changes of state. This makes them ideal for the SL environment used by artists and their technical teams (the objects designed and built there can allocate various scripts and having them run simultaneously). The link between these technical subjects, particularly aesthetic behaviour and artistic expression in VWs is a field of research for future projects, in connection with the aesthetic and media articulations examined in this thesis.

By the same token, between 2006 and 2012 Linden Lab provided enhancement and upgrading for several versions of ‘viewers’ (visual interfaces while in world), and introduced, unified and acquired different services like voice, hyper communication sets, group chat, communication to other SIMS, and other significant improvements in sensorial, interactive and immersive areas, like Gridwide (2011) Pathfinder Beta, and Project Shining (2012). This was intended to improve and enhance avatar appearance, object performance and data stream speed. Evidently the artist’s work examined in the case studies benefited by having tools and digital processes at their disposition that allowed for the use of voice, teletransporting, broadcasting and real time connectivity with the exterior. The contextualised impact and use of these technical components explain many of the ambitious aesthetic goals pursued by the artists included herewithin. Today anyone can visit the Odyssey virtual performance centre in SL and observe the generalised use of these technical apparatuses in the next edition of Bryn Oh’s *Immersiva*.

These are important issues that could not be elaborated upon in this dissertation due to limited space and time constraints. Furthermore, Second Life has changed significantly over the past three years during the research for this thesis and will continue to evolve. As it does so, it will become necessary to approach the environment from other, more current perspectives. However, the above-mentioned topics are certainly themes I look forward to exploring in future research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Eva and Franco Mattes

General Questions

(All answers are as written by the avatars, and have not been corrected for spelling or grammatical errors.)

How would you define your artwork within the SL context?

We do performances, pretty much like old performance art but inside a videogame, so without a physical body. We interact with our audience through avatars, everything is mediated.

What is (are) your view(s) on the way or direction that virtual art is “moving” these days?

What we call “virtual” today will become “real” tomorrow, it’s just a matter of getting used to the new medium. When the Internet started people used to call it “virtual”. Now nobody thinks his online bank account is “virtual”.

What role does subjectivity take in the creative process in SL?

Once you program all the scripts you’re not so important anymore, you could have somebody else performing for you. Maybe you could also have a computer performing, without the audience realizing it. Maybe also the audience could be computers pretending to be audience...

Are you interested in hybrid art or practices linking virtual and actual worlds?

I don’t see any difference between virtual and actual worlds. A chat between avatars is as real—or unreal—as a phone conversation. An avatar is more real than god, that doesn’t exist, but seems to have a lot of power over humans.

Who is your audience?

I have no idea, I never met them.

From the eyes and mind of an artist, what is the future of SL as a social virtual environment?

It will disappear, soon we won’t see it anymore, as we don’t see the plumbing system, it’s just there and you take it for granted.

Does an Art community exist in SL?

There are many art communities, we hang out at Odyssey, where there are most of the performance artists.

Specific Questions

Is supplanting (even surrogating) easy, or not so within SL?

Are you (as a team) interested in blurring and mixing boundaries within SL and actual life, and if so, is this part of your aesthetic goals?

See answer n. 4

Does there exist an 'active' counterculture movement in terms of the technical and aesthetic possibilities of virtual realms technology, such as SL? What are your views on this issue?

Sure, you've got protests, sit-ins, hacks of any kind, and if you go too far you get banned by the owners. That's the highest form of repression. Better than spending a night in jail anyway.

Is there any (if so) importance in bridging virtual existence and actual existence? From your artist's perspective, is there any difference?

See answer n. 4

How would you define the current dominant Ethos in SL, let's say a sort of virtual public sphere (to call it such) in SL?

In general, we've always considered the Internet a public space, like streets and squares. Although most of it is privately owned, there is place for public discussion. What we try to do with some of our works, like *My Generation* (2010) or *Life Sharing* (2000-2003) for example, is to show how the distinction between public and private is actually blurred.

What is exclusive of the SL context for art production such as yours?

In Second Life you've got an audience that knows what performance art is, and acts accordingly. While if you do performances in other video games, like we recently did in *Freedom* (2010), your audience may blow your head off at any given moment. It's more difficult to perform in such environments.

What must a newcomer in SL first learn, bump into, confront, decipher?

Second Life is interesting in the moment you start building and scripting, that's the fun part. Being there as spectator becomes boring very quickly.

Would you like to define something like Programming or code-aesthetics?

Appendix B: Gazira Babeli

General Questions

(All answers are as written by the avatar, and have not been corrected for spelling or grammatical errors.)

How would you define your artwork within the SL context?

Basically with a tautology: I defined my artwork within the SL context. The art discipline can't exist without a kind of 'frame', 'stage', 'screen' that defines the boundaries. I just add the artist and her audience within the boundaries that define the artwork and its rules. It's not easy for me to judge the results, but sometimes I thought it was a sort of opposite of FLUXUS idea.

What is (are) your view(s) on the way or direction that virtual art is "moving" these days?

I never understand this kind of questions. The 'future of art' is not different from its past. Art use to be virtual From Lascaux caves. Computers, Internet, 3D simulation and social communities are just minor details.

What role does subjectivity take in the creative process in SL?

Not different from RL. Art is made by 33% of culture/knowledge, 33% discipline, 33% ideology, 1% subjectivity. Subjectivity is the important spice that glue the other 3 elements.

Are you interested in hybrid art or practices linking virtual and actual worlds?

I cannot see the difference between 'virtual' and 'actual' because they are actually overlined.

Who is your audience?

Who knows? Artists I suppose. But I never imagined them as audience, I used them as parts of the artworks.

From the eyes and mind of an artist, what is the future of SL as a social virtual environment?

Personally, I don't think that 'social virtual' communities will have a good future.

Maybe a great diffusion, yes, just like cocaine.

Does an Art community exist in SL?

Many of them existed, but the only one that happened spontaneously has been Odyssey. That has been "in the wild".

Specific Questions

Would you be interested in defining terms like Code-Art, Code-Aesthetics, Art and Programming, and so on?

Yes, of course. But LSL code is really peculiar. The program execution can ‘physically’ affect the perceive of the world and its residents. Suspension of disbelief + an “unknown-physical-perceived-variable”. Talking aesthetically, I found all of that pretty new.

“Pop Art hates you” yes, but why, and how? What is the role of subjectivity, art, mass communication and social networking in SL, in relation to a powerful resource like coding?

The answer is in the first part of that joke, it's the part that you forgot to quote: “You love Pop Art” ... then ...

From your perspective, is there an active counterculture in SL? What are your views on this matter?

I formed my opinion about 10 years ago: “Internet seems a wonderful place where parking any kind of countercultures”. Few years later, In-Q-Tel (a CIA non profit) financed a website called Facebook.

What must a newcomer in SL first learn, bump into, confront, decipher?

Just honestly ask to himself: why am I here?

Has Gazira Babeli always been the same, physically, psychologically, emotionally?

Basically yes.

How is the Italian art scene around electronic, digital and interactive art?

Many interesting initiatives, few good ideas, no money. Just like anywhere.

How would you define your artist statement, and what is next in this sense?

Appendix C: Bryn Oh

General Questions

(All answers are as written by the avatar, and have not been corrected for spelling or grammatical errors.)

How would you define your artwork within the SL context?

When I first discovered Second Life I quickly began to view it as an art medium. I would observe its

strengths and weaknesses in an attempt to understand how it could best be used for art creation. Trying to determine what made it unique over other forms of art.

After thinking about it for a while I considered the school of thought, movement or direction I was going in to be called Immersiva. I am an oil painter and the best way to describe Immersiva is to contrast it against another form of art which I am going to do now with painting. Currently as I am writing this, there is a winter storm outside my window. From where I am sitting I can see mounds of rime or graupel building up on the roofs and fences. The wind is buffeting things beyond my window, yet I do not hear it. I am drinking coffee in a bathrobe and slippers and feeling quite toasty. I have no connection to what I see outside my window.

When I create a painting of a winter storm I must strive to capture the feeling of being in the cold. If it's a white out, then I must use a variety of techniques to bring out the appropriate feeling in the viewer. I have a static two dimensional surface to manipulate with colour theory, composition and line. If I do it incorrectly then it's no different than how I am dispassionately viewing the real storm outside my window as I write this. I need to convince the viewer that they are in my storm. One way that I do this is by creating large paintings which block out ones peripheral vision. When you stand in front of a painting in a gallery or at home you have problems becoming immersed in the subject you are viewing, due to distractions outside the frame of the painting. You might hear a nearby conversation, a cell phone ring, or perhaps you can feel the eyes of the security guards watching you. Or it could be something as simple as seeing a scuff on the wall or a thermostat. It doesn't need to be a powerful distraction; it merely needs to interrupt the slow process of becoming immersed.

The artist's goal is to fight these distractions so the viewer can connect with the painting. I did do a painting of a winter storm a few years ago, a road partially covered in snow with some fading telephone poles along the side. It was sold and the new owner returned it after a month. She said that the painting created a sense of anxiety and cold within her. She felt that she was lost in that storm. This was of course a wonderful thing to hear for me, and since it sold again the following week it didn't matter that it was returned. The techniques used created an immersive experience for her, those techniques were more successful than me looking out my window at this real storm assaulting the world outside my window.

When I look at a virtual world (specifically second life) as a medium, it has far more depth to create immersion than my static 2D work. I have access to ambient sound which can subtly funnel ones mood into a specific direction. My winter storm now has the ambience of blowing wind. I can script which is a type of programming. This opens quite a few more doors but in relation to a winter storm it would allow me to add blowing snow particles or other forms of movement just to name a very few applications.

There is of course also the 3D space itself. I have my static winter storm on canvas which we can look at from one perspective. In a virtual world you can start with that view and then walk into the storm. You can

get lost; perhaps find an abandoned house which you can then explore. It is a different level of immersion. When I was a child I would turn over rocks to see what was underneath them. I would find new worlds of insects. Centipedes, grubs, worms, beetles, spiders and ants. I would lose track of everything around me as I discovered these fascinating little worlds. That is the potential of Immersiva and my artwork in Second Life.

What is (are) your view(s) on the way or direction that virtual art is “moving” these days?

I think a great deal depends on funding. As a painter I can sell my paintings generating revenue yet “selling” virtual art is difficult as people tend to like to own tangible, physical artworks. As a result, granting is very important in order to gain access to new technologies. For example, I currently wish to experiment with Kinect, the Xbox feature that allows recognition of arm and body movements to affect their video games. As a painter I can sell a work and reinvest in canvas, paint etc. As a virtual artist there is very little revenue, to invest in Kinect or just paying bills requires granting or some form of support.

The role of art in society ranges from political comment to pleasure. I will give an example of the latter, but the virtual can be used for all ranges. It is so versatile in that regard.

Imagine coming home from work all irritable and exhausted. You can relax on the couch and turn on the TV. Put on a movie and let it tell us a story. You can look at your favorite painting on the wall or lose yourself on the internet. So one example would be a virtual artwork which is a custom environment. You enter a room or wear specialized head gear that removes all real life distractions. No cell phones, pets or bills. You enter a 360 degree immersive environment which has been created specifically for you. Perhaps it is in a canoe at dusk on a lake in Algonquin. Loons calling and the lap of water. A gallery show could have fans strategically placed around the viewer to create the sense of wind on your face. Very subtle scents can be introduced into the experience to help deepen the immersion. The smell of pine trees roll over you or the smell of a northern lake. The artist has spoken to you in depth or perhaps you have filled out an exhaustive online form which gets to the root of your inner desires. This environment can be yours alone or you can have it open for friends to join you. A social environment to share a greater depth of your personality. It’s a place of solitude that you had a hand in creating.

You can also imagine doing this for your Grandparents home, which has now been demolished. The smell of baking pies and all the little trinkets on the shelves. You can meet here with your family from down the street, across the country or world. Distance is irrelevant. The artist could do commissioned environments for you as described above, or as many would do, create their own environment and you would experience it without any preconceived notions of what to expect. Whether narrative or political comment. They could lock you in Guantánamo Bay detention camp or let you experience the other side of “Shock and awe” bombardment. You could explore the solar system or a Petri dish. The range is incredible.

I believe we are at the fumbling beginnings of a new art movement, one which will challenge our notion of reality and identity. It will be both the pinnacle of artistic creativity and also the newest form of addiction to supplant all others.

What role does subjectivity take in the creative process in SL?

For me it is an essential part. It is the placing of my internal reality into a virtual reality. Very few people know my “first life” identity. My family and friends don’t know about Bryn Oh and most are just vaguely aware I create virtual art. As a result I have a type of freedom to look at and express my internal reality in a pure form. I know that if my parents were to experience my artwork they might worry about the melancholy inherent in almost all the works. They might feel responsible. I might shy away from expressing thoughts and emotions that could hurt those I love. My subjectivity is a direct result of my anonymity. One of the most unexpected and important elements to a virtual world is how its inhabitants connect to one another. For example, people fall in love in virtual worlds. They are not falling in love with another cartoon character; rather they fall in love with another mind. Our first life physical bodies take a back seat to our thoughts and words. Second Life as a medium excels in this area due to its level of immersion. People from around the world explore my artworks. My thoughts and emotions, and most can associate with them in some way. I say more than I would in my first life, and they listen more than they normally would in the world of eye contact and social expectations.

Are you interested in hybrid art or practices linking virtual and actual worlds?

Yes actually that was one of my goals when I began the art project of Bryn Oh. I wanted to see if a pixel character with no connection to a real life person could succeed in crossing over to the flesh and blood world of art. Could a digital character be accepted beside a living breathing artist in a gallery? Bryn Oh’s work has been exhibited in first life galleries as a digital character, she was in the World Expo in Shanghai, Nuit Blanche, worked with the Director Peter Greenaway and artist Stelarc. She is in the syllabus of universities and works with companies such as IBM. All as a pixel character, not as the aka for a person. So yes I am interested in linking them.

Who is your audience?

My audiences are those who like to lift up a rock to see what lives under it. People with great curiosity and patience. I hide many elements to my work inside the surface. Both mentally and physically. For example, I may have a tiny word printed on the side of a work. If the viewer types that word in chat then the sculpture will “hear” it and open up a hidden compartment. When the compartment opens the viewer will then be able to find new layers to contemplate. If that viewer doesn’t type the word in the first place then they will never discover other elements. The work stands on its own without finding the secondary parts yet they are elements for those who love to find things. They discover them and know a little something about me or the

artwork that others do not. They have the option of telling their friends about what they found or keeping it to themselves. I spoke to an American artist the other day and he said “I don’t want to do work to look at your art” and those with this mentality are not my audience. I don’t dumb down my work in the hopes of appealing to everyone. It is artwork for the curious, patient and empathetic.

From the eyes and mind of an artist, what is the future of SL as a social virtual environment?

That is an interesting question. It’s difficult to separate the artist from what I see as a resident of the virtual world. For example, Ron Humble from Electronic Arts was just made new CEO of Linden Labs. He was responsible for many games including the most successful... the Sims. This leads me to think that the future of SL might have more focus on game elements.

I was daydreaming the other day about a rumour of Microsoft buying Second Life. It occurred to me that many of my friends play games online, and they go to text based “rooms” to meet other gamers to play. They are represented by an icon and there is a very limited amount of social interaction. Yet they spend hours designing their icon or character in game. I imagined SL being pre installed on the Xbox to create a world for gamers as well. It’s no secret that video games have surpassed Hollywood in revenue, I imagine it would be a good idea to give all these gamers a place to socialize before and after playing games. There are already live musicians and shopping malls so really it would just be about quadrupling the population and catching the eye of salivating marketing companies. It could be a fertile place to create a deeper identity.

Does an Art community exist in SL?

There is a very unique and complex art community that exists within SL. Both with the artists and its patrons. The community is broken up into perspectives on art. For example, I believe strongly in creating art that is unique to this medium. Looking at its strengths and weaknesses and focusing on those elements. For me it is to create Immersiva. Or full immersion builds. I am also an oil painter, but I do not bring in images of my work as “art” because they lose most of their own strengths when turned into a jpeg. When viewing them in rl they have rich texturing and a relief almost like a landscape for the eye to follow. They have a certain presence. When turned into a jpeg and put in a virtual world they lose their texture and so on. They become a shadow of the original. So for me the uniqueness of the medium is in using the 3D tools and space. Scripting, narrative, movement, sound and so on. Others who are painters in rl will often bring in the jpegs and never touch the native tools here. And that is more a form of marketing. Another interesting element to the community is its breakdown by profession. If you look at a list of artists represented by a typical gallery you will find that the vast majority have gone to art school somewhere or other. In Second Life the classically trained artist who works with prims is much more rare. The classically trained often just bring in the jpeg of their RL work to show in a gallery setting. What is really interesting and unique about the artists in SL are that many of them are everything from chefs, mathematicians,

programmers to marine biologists. It's almost like Folk or Outsider Art. People come to the virtual world and begin creating out of an inner desire to do so.

Specific Questions

Moviemaker, visual storyteller and very skilled digital-tech SL dreamer in one, who is Bryn Oh?

Bryn Oh is a visual character which houses my personality. Her face is composed using traditional art methods and her body language is created to develop a persona as detected by the viewer. She is a vessel which flavours everything I say or create. Bryn is an art project whereby I am creating a virtual ghost artist for myself in an attempt to see if she can succeed outside the walled garden of a virtual world. Could she show her artwork in first life galleries alongside traditional artists? I often think of Bryn Oh in relation to a marionette show. If you went to see Ronnie Burkett or another perform a show you would sit in your chair and watch the curtain open. The people controlling the marionettes would be dressed in black and in a short time those marionettes would become like a living person, you would forget they were composed of wood and string. If someone were to suddenly turn on the lights and you saw the puppet being controlled by a person the suspension of disbelief would be disrupted. The marionette would go back to being a composition of wire, wood and paint. I want to keep the lights off for Bryn so that she maintains her persona rather than become the puppet. Bryn Oh allows me to speak of my hopes; dreams and fears all bundled up within her narratives. She is her own entity yet also an outlet for me.

How would Bryn Oh describe the role of 'technique' in art creation/production?

I think it is essential for an artist to understand technique when creating work. From that knowledge they can move forward finding the balance between technique and the loose unfettered use of one's creative mind. So for example, to understand how to use composition, colour theory and form when attempting to lead the viewer's eye around a 3D scene is critical. What are your important areas in a piece? What is the focal point and how do you get the viewer to look at these areas? A painting is a 2D image on a wall and you know from where the viewer will look at your work. In a 3D environment the viewer can look at your work from 360 degrees, so the composition must accommodate that freedom. Your composition must succeed from many more angles. Also with the nature of virtual art one must understand scripting and its relation to creating lag. Lag is where your computer struggles to deal with an excess of information coming to it, as a result everything slows down and in some cases will crash your computer. An artist in SL who uses scripts must understand that if a viewer is subjected to excessive lag they will become irritated and leave. It will not matter how good your artwork is at that point as they will not stick around to see it.

In a virtual world technique involves more than just the artistic process, but rather the understanding of technical limitations for the medium as well as a psychological element based off of your artistic focus which in my case is creating Immersiva. Here is how technique is used to build Immersiva. What I wish to

do is to create an experience for the viewer which captivates their imagination to a degree that their focus is almost exclusively on my artwork. The technique involves discovering “hooks” which will keep the viewer engaged. As I mentioned in the first question, I use sound, movement, narrative, scripting, machinima, interaction and so on to constantly keep the viewer engaged. The state of Immersiva is so fragile that it can be easily broken at this stage in technology. Without an understanding of how to create and maintain this state, there can only be a basic form of immersion.

When attempting to put emotion or life within an artwork in a virtual realm there are a few things to be aware of. One is your initial separation from the medium. The painter paints using a brush. The brush separates the direct emotion channeled through our hand to the surface of the painting. Using a canvas backing compared to wood, the length of hair on the brush and where you hold it all affect how your emotions are transferred to the painting surface. When looking at a good painting you subconsciously pick up the emotion of the painter as they did the work (provided it is not a very tight painting technique) If they are angry you will see it in the brush strokes and application of paint. There may be stabbing motions or distinctive pressures used in locations. But in the end it must travel through the brush. A sculptor works directly with their hands against the surface of their creation. This is one less obstacle. Virtual work is done on a keyboard which is not very conducive to transferring emotion into your sculpture work. Making a cube while angry is indistinguishable from making one while happy. Understanding how to transfer emotion despite this obstruction also involves technique. So to sum it all up Bryn Oh would say that technique has a great role when creating/producing.

Are you producing artwork off the digital/computerized realm?

Yes my career is as an oil painter.

“Inhabiting an image” is one of your mottos, but how do you accomplish this from a highly intellectualized and mediated ‘sensitivity’ through avatars and screens?

I think I have answered this question with my description of techniques used for creating Immersiva and also with mentioning how people fall in love with each other’s minds here. But let’s look at a different element to consider when we talk about inhabiting an artwork. When you interact with a sculpture your hand caresses its surface. You feel the temperature of its marble or stone. The figure resides in your space and often you can walk around it. With a painting you interact from around 5 feet away. It is a snapshot of a moment in time. Your eyes roam the surface texture and are led around by composition. When we get to film they work to add more interaction. They open the curtains to signal an event about to transpire. They dim the lights so you focus on the screen. They make the screen itself huge so that it takes up most of your peripheral vision. They turn the sound up very high so that those around you can not distract with noise. For two hours or so they want you to just see the film. However, you passively sit and listen to the story they tell you. You cannot change nor interact with it. You are watching something transpire. If you go the

next day the film will not change. The outcome will always be the same. In a virtual world it has the potential to be open ended. You are not constrained by a story nor are you interacting as an observer from a distance. You are embedded within the world. When you come to one of my works you also inhabit it. You are an active participant. Depending on the amount of effort you put into searching my narratives, is the degree with which you can inhabit it.

Do you have a systematized (or established) creative process, or 'plots', images and narratives that come to you in diverse and random ways?

That's pretty hard to explain. There are different things in my life that I have a hard time expressing. Things from my past, and wishes for my future. Dreams and longings. Pretty much I look internally and express in my narratives some of the things that I wouldn't want to say to friends or family. So as an anonymous artist I can express those things inside me and never worry about it causing hurt to those I love. It's a form of a digital diary in a way, but hidden behind stories of abandoned robots. So I find something inside myself I want to bring out. From here I will sketch out ideas or ways to express it in a way that allows the viewer be able to interpret on their own. A level of ambiguity that allows people to use their own creativity in finding meaning. This is important to me as I believe that an artist should not really tell someone what to think when viewing an artwork. To do so doesn't allow the viewer to be a participant. To be creative when interacting. From my drawings I then begin to sketch out poetry to help express the idea. Sometimes these are reversed with the poetry coming first. Once I have a direction I will then begin to build the work in 3D. This is my main focus and involves creating the Immersiva which is to me the strength of this medium. This part can takes between one or two months depending on whether it is a full sim build or parts to a story. It is by far the most labour intensive part of creation and the most important. The scripting, implementation of sound or movement, the planning of the scenes composition and how the viewer will interact with them. No to mention the actual building process. □ Once this portion is complete I will then film machinima portions to the build as additional story elements, generally this being the final stage to creation.

Where is Bryn Oh going in the future in SL?

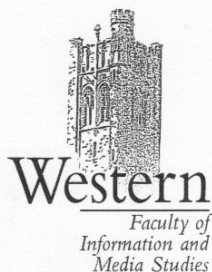
On March 14th I was informed by the Ontario Arts Council that I had received a grant for my immersive narrative "Standby" in the amount of \$10k. This grant will allow me to further develop one of my large narratives into a 30 minute machinima which I can then shop to people who may wish to develop it further. That is my hope anyway. The second part to the proposal is to create a gallery exhibit which I will either use to show the art project of Bryn Oh, or it may also be used to develop a 3D immersive environment based off of my characters. This would likely include virtual reality glasses, fans and scent to create a space for the viewer to experience the idea of a painting you can enter and explore. This part will be tricky as the grant does not allow for me to purchase equipment such as computers, monitor, projectors or the virtual eyewear. So depending on whether I will have access to these tools will determine what type of show it will

end up being. But it is very exciting to have a jury of peers see my work and choose it over other traditional art proposals. It's a form of legitimization of the medium, and this is what I find very rewarding.

What must a newcomer in SL first learn, bump into, confront, decipher?

I suppose the first thing they are to learn is that SL is not a game. That the founding company Linden Labs have merely given us the ground to walk on and the residents are the ones who create the virtual world. They must learn to disconnect the camera away from the first person view and use that new freedom to explore the details of the world. My builds are generally for the more advanced user who is able to have that "out of body" camera experience where they can maneuver into tiny spaces or hidden tunnels to find the tiny details. I think these are some of the first things a newcomer must understand.

Appendix D: Non-Medical Research Ethics Protocol



Office of the Dean

Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

All non-medical research involving human subjects at the University of Western Ontario is carried out in compliance with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Guidelines (2010). The Faculty of Information Media Studies (FIMS) Research Committee has the mandate to review minimal-risk FIMS research proposals for adherence to these guidelines.

2011 – 2012 FIMS Research Committee Membership

- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|-----|----------------|
| 1. | R. Babe | 7. | A. Pyati |
| 2. | A. Benoit | 8. | A. Quan-Haase |
| 3. | J. Burkell (alt) | 9. | D. Robinson |
| 4. | E. Comor | 10. | K. Sedig (alt) |
| 5. | C. Hoffman | 11. | L. Xiao |
| 6. | P. McKenzie (Chair)* | | |

Research Committee member(s) marked with * have examined the research project
FIMS 2010-021R entitled:

Because I am not here: selected Second Life based art case studies: subjectivity, autoempathy and virtual world aesthetics.

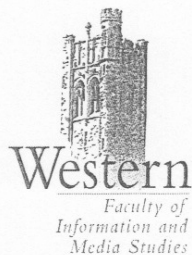
as submitted by: Carole Farber (Principal Investigator / Supervisor)
Francisco Gerardo Toledo Ramirez (Co-investigator / Student)

and consider it to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects under the conditions of the University's Policy on Research Involving Human Subjects. Approval is given for the period **November 2, 2010 to December 31, 2012.**

Approval Date: 8 December 2011

Pamela McKenzie, Assistant Dean (Research)
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Office of the Dean

Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

All non-medical research involving human subjects at the University of Western Ontario is carried out in compliance with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Guidelines (2002). The Faculty of Information & Media Studies (FIMS) Research Committee has the mandate to review minimal risk research proposals for members of the FIMS community. Proposals are reviewed for adherence to the above guidelines.

2010 – 2011 FIMS Research Committee Membership

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. J. Burkell (alt) | 6. P. McKenzie (Chair)* |
| 2. G. Campbell | 7. D. Neal* |
| 3. C. Farber | 8. K. Sedig (alt) |
| 4. H. Hill | 9. L. Xiao |
| 5. V. Manzerolle | 10. C. Whippey |

Research Committee members marked with * have examined the research project **FIMS 2010-021** entitled:

Because I am not here: selected Second Life based art case studies: subjectivity, autoempathy and virtual world aesthetics.

as submitted by: Carole Farber (Principal Investigator / Supervisor)
Francisco Gerardo Toledo Ramirez (Co-investigator / Student)

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Approval Date: November 2, 2010

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Publications:**

Toledo Ramírez, Francisco Gerardo. (2012). Individually Social: From Distribute Aesthetics to New Media Literacy. Approaching the Merging of Virtual Worlds, Semantic Web and Social Networks. Chapter in *The Immersive Internet*. Robin Tieglund and Dominic Power, Editors. (in press)

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