

Gazira Babeli Come Together



Gazira is dead? Long live Gazira!

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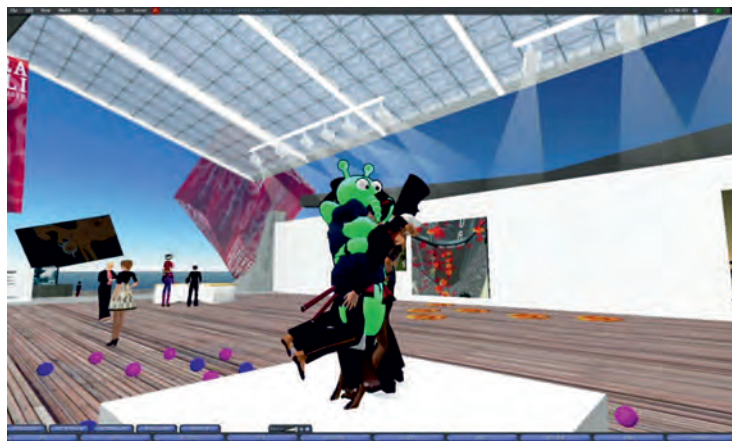
«Gazira Babeli as a whole and *Come Together* in particular are among most important art project of the last decade».
_ALEXEI SHULGIN [1]

I
“Gazira Babeli” is the temporary form taken by an artist who has always obstinately stayed in the realm of non visibility, but has managed to forge identities that are accepted and recognised by many as real. The most recent, and, it is to be hoped, not the last – is that of “Gazira Babeli”.

The name first appeared in spring 2006. It was then that various people sitting in front of computers interacting with a promising new “virtual world” began to associate this moniker with an outlandish character, a tall, thin woman dressed in black from head to toe, wearing a top hat, dark glasses and engaged in dreaming arms in the “workshops” of Second Life (in Gazira’s world, as in that of Philip K. Dick, weapons are not designed but dreamt, inspired by who knows what other world, and

concocted using code and textures). But the dreamers of arms [2] were not destined to remain the main social group in Second Life for long: settlers, defectors from the real world and the merely curious were arriving in droves, attracted by the siren call of the media and the fantasy of an alternative life.

A hacker among hackers, Gazira Babeli soon began to attract interest from a new quarter: artists. Her unauthorised performances created a stir in a world dominated by wonder, and where wonder is the first sensation to disappear as boredom creeps in. After less than a year, Odyssey, Second Life’s first community of artists, that Gazira helped launch, dedicated a retrospective to her which became the first convincing proof that it was possible to create art inside a second rate 3D software programme [3]. In a world in which artists were falling over themselves to reproduce reality (constructing white cubes and decorating the walls), or sound out the alleged “creative



Come Together
Still form video.
Avatar group sculpture.
Odyssey performance,
16 April 2007.



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potential” of a software programme designed by someone else, Gazira opened up a third way, based on subverting the users’ consensual visual hallucination. You say the word “world” and she unleashes an earthquake or a storm of pop images; you say “body”, and she deforms yours; you say “museum” and she fills it with pizzas; you say “Pop” and she traps you inside a tin of Campbell’s soup. If all this was merely played out in the restricted confines of a virtual world, it would have little to say to the outside world. But for Gazira, Second Life is a workshop, a protected space where she could carry out hazardous experiments without lethal consequences. Student of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo (who in 1971, coordinated the psychology experiment in Stanford prison), Gazira Babeli shut herself away in this simulated reality for four years, subverting its conventions and observing the fall out from her actions. If her world was the Truman Show, and we were Truman, Gazira would be the one dazzling us with floodlights, rewriting the extras’ scripts to mind-bending effect and drawing a giant question mark on what we thought was the sky but is actually just a set.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the “outside” world soon began to get accustomed to an artist officially born in 2006, who can be

contacted only through an email address or the avatar she deployed in Second Life. This ability to assert her own reality has always impressed me. Other artists - Eva and Franco Mattes, Cao Fey / China Tracy and many more - have successfully assumed the guise of avatar artists, but in most cases their profile has remained anchored to the previously established identity of their real counterpart. Gazira is the only artist who has managed to lend her mask such an effective reality coefficient that, in the space of a few short months and entirely off her own bat, she has made it into galleries and museums. Even this, however, has its precedents: in the late 90s, “virtual” identities like jodi and etoy, embodied by an internet URL, soon overtook the humans in charge of them; and more in general, the web proved to be an excellent springboard for constructed artistic identities, be they collective or individual: 0100101110101101.org, @™mark, Mouchette, Netochka *Nezvanova*, [epidemicC] and UBERMORGEN.COM. Like all of these, “Gazira Babeli” was the first and main work of art by Gazira Babeli.

Between 2006 and 2010 – 24 years in Second Life time, where one day lasts four hours – Gazira Babeli was extraordinarily active, taking part in the work of the international group of performers Second Front and helping run Odyssey. She even bought her own island, Locusolus, as a

permanent home for her works. Then, on 26 February 2010, she entered Second Life for the very last time.

II

Given that the software created by Linden Lab is the place where Gazira Babeli was born, and where she took a mainly recognisable form, her disappearance was seen as a “death”. The artist herself played with this story, accompanying authorised biographies with the caption: “active 2006 – 2010”. Her departure can be accounted for in various ways. After peaking, Second Life and virtual worlds entered the downward phase of the hype cycle, and media interest, investments and the number of active users dropped off. In a short space of time Second Life lost its unique selling point, which consisted in its being a socially interesting setting: an arena populated by hackers, pioneers, entrepreneurs, creatives, crackpots, criminals and mere window shoppers, where everything that went on received great attention both “in world” and out. At the same time, art was gradually moving away from “the wilderness outside”, and had voluntarily confined itself to limited, protected, institutionalised and incredibly boring settings. When the audience dwindles to a few, annoying, over-enthusiastic latecomers, art becomes a hyper-defined phenomenon and the community spirit falls away, the “scene” dies and the more interesting figures move somewhere else. But while the game “in world” was getting boring, going “outside” represented a risk. One of the most interesting, and most worrying, biopolitical implications of our current online lives, whatever the system that enables them

(from Gmail to Facebook, Second Life to Dropbox) is that we are not the sole, or even the main owners. As a simulated world, in Second Life this is, narratively-speaking, visible. Linden Lab represents a sort of oligarchy of calm but authoritarian feudal overlords, who permit the serfs to work their land en masse, up to the point when they decide to exercise their “ius primae noctis”. Which is when you could discover that nothing you have created actually belongs to you. In 2010, Gazira Babeli removed herself and her works from the place that appeared to have been the necessary condition of her existence: thousands of lines of code, 3D models, textures, objects created, bought and stolen that made her a living entity and an artist. This gesture can be interpreted, in her words, as a genuine “declaration of independence. Independence from Linden Lab and the internet. A vital act, not an abandonment. A political act, not a question of archiving.” Once of the first to experience life in the “cloud”, Gazira Babeli is not dead, nor has she fled, but her latest works form an epic escape story.

III

But Gazira Babeli’s “executables/standalone simulators” are more than just an act of freedom from Second Life, and a reassuring response to those who feared that the destiny of artists like her was inextricably bound up with a proprietary software and managed by an American company that has and retains the final say on its development, its aesthetic and its contents. They are also a declaration of independence from the art world, enabling her work to circulate not only in the impoverished form made possible by documentation, but also



in its native software form: a programme entirely written by the artist using Open Source software, and therefore documented, preservable and archivable. As Boris Groys observes ^[4], the documentation of art, in order to display and preserve it in exhibition venues, has taken off since art started happening elsewhere (or rather, outside of its conventional settings) and in forms that resist commercialisation and museification. This however means that the art world is now faced with an interesting paradox: the need to elevate to the status of “art” something that by definition is not art, namely its documentation. In order to be commercially viable and museum-friendly, the documentation of art must take on the value that originally resided in the artistic act it documents. Regardless of its usefulness, and the possible good intentions of those who initiated this practice, this stratagem remains a product of a world that is conservative, fetishistic and hooked on obsolete customs and conventions. Vice versa, software is the expressive language



chosen by a series of artists who do not wish to play the game of art according to the reassuring rules imposed on them, but who set out to make the world dance to their own tune. Software as a means for documenting software is the gauntlet that Gazira Babeli throws down to the art world. Gazira Babeli’s “simulators” enable her to preserve her work in its original radical form, and not just in its radical concept. Take **Come Together**, for example. This work came into being in 2007 on occasion of *[Collateral Damage]*, Gazira Babeli’s retrospective in Second Life, and consists in a white pedestal that visitors to the exhibition were free to climb onto. Once on this “magic base”, their bodies were “possessed” by a piece of software that forced them to perform various dance moves. As other visitors joined in, the work became a unified, animated Baroque sculpture. The reference to Piero Manzoni’s magic bases is more than just linguistic. Gazira Babeli’s pedestal has the same function: it turns anyone who climbs onto it into art. But the magic lies in

Come Together

Avatar group sculpture.
Performance, March 2007
Digital print on canvas, 120,8x94 cm

more than just the conceptual shift away from the thought that pedestals call for statues: the software has the added power of making these bodies – perceived as such by anyone who has spent more than ten minutes in a virtual world – do what it wants. It reveals their nature as artefacts, puppets. In a public, participatory context like Second Life, it was logical to interpret this work as “performance art”, but in actual fact no-one is performing anything but themselves, their own unique, unrepeatable presence, the fact of existing, in that moment, in avatar form: it is the code, written and executed by Gazira, that is performative. It is the software that is the main ingredient of the magic. This becomes evident in the “simulator” version of the work, in which the fifteen naked bodies moving on the pedestal are ones that have been chosen and freed by Gazira. Once outside the circumstantial dimension of Second Life, **Come Together** can be seen for what it is: a software artist’s contribution to the history of Western sculpture. Behind that glossy, reassuring appearance, Gazira Babeli is a virus in a commercial software programme used by millions of people, a virus that subverts the structures and cracks the surface of the programme. As art should do, it forces us to think about the world we live in, and the new meanings acquired by concepts like identity, body, space, time and society, rejecting the facile truths dished out by those who’d prefer us not to think. As art should do, it takes forms that are anomalous and foreign to the avant-garde academe that has reduced the fruits of artistic labour to an easy recipe for tasteless dishes.

This is why I agree with the declaration of the artist Alexei Shulgin I quoted at the start, and this is why, until she chooses, Gazira is alive and kicking. Long live Gazira!

- [1] Personal correspondence, 28 October 2011.
- [2] Expression borrowed from Philip K. Dick, *The Zap Gun*, Pyramid Books, 1967.
- [3] *[Collateral Damage]*, ExhibitA, Odyssey, April 16 – June 30, 2007. Curated by Sugar Seville and Beavis Palowakski.
- [4] Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation”, in *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2008, pp. 53 – 65.

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