Spawn of the Surreal Digest

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Around 2006, virtual worlds entered the peak of their hype cycle. One of the pupils of the mass media was Second Life, a synthetic environment that gave its users an high level of freedom, both in terms of design and of in-world activity. Unsurprisingly, many of these users were artists and creatives, entering virtual worlds as a new field of experimentation and as a new distribution platform. A small but extremely dynamic art world developed in Second Life, including artists, art critics, galleries and no-profit organizations. That same year, I designed my own avatar (which, for a funny chance, had my very same name) and some months later, I launched "Spawn of the Surreal" (http://spawnofthesurreal.blogspot.com/), a blog that featured the results of my explorations of what I called "the dumpster of the imaginary". My first post on "Spawn of the Surreal" dates back to July 4, 2007; the last one was written on September 9, 2009, even if it stopped being a regularly updated blog some months before. That is when, more or less, Second Life stopped being, at least to me, an interesting playground for radical artistic experimentation.

This doesn't mean, of course, that nothing interesting is happening out there anymore. What was gone in 2008, and is gone today, was the "community": the feeling of being a bunch of happy few, conquering a temporarily autonomous zones where there were no rules, no institutions, no definitions, no boundaries.

"Let's Start"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, July 4, 2007

Traveling without keeping memories of the travel is frustrating. I pile up pictures on my hard disk, but when I go back to them I don't remember what they are picturing, and when and where I shot them.

I entered Second Life some months ago, and for the first time I have more things to say than what I can usually pour in articles, reviews and exibitions. So, I came up with the idea of a blog - an idea always thrown away to the folder of the "NOT TO DO" things. At least till now...

But Spawn of the Surreal – the title coming from a celebrated performance by Second Front - doesn't want to keep just memories of my travels in Second Life. Lots of people are doing it, probably better then me. I'n not a reporter, I'm an art critic. I want to understand what art is, and what does it means to make art in a virtual world. Sisiphus, come with me. You have lots of experience to share about impossible jobs...

ART. Every time I go to an ART gallery, an ART museum; every time I meet a wannabe ART work, or a self-declared ARTIST in Second Life, I have to ask to myself: what's ART for me? In real life, we can accept everything with an art label as art. In Second Life, it's totally different. Out there the art spell is broken, victim of another spell. The aura breaks into fragments: shattered not by the collapse of the mystique of the artifact, but by the rise of a new mystique: that of the virtual world. How shall we rebuild it? Make your own bet!

I have my own idea about art in Second Life. For me, SL artists are the spawn of the surreal. What does it mean? That's my own bet: try to make it make sense...

"Critics and enthusiasts"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, July 27, 2007

Strange enough, if I always get angry when I find a Second Life enthusiast, I usually disagree with commonplace criticism of Second Life. What am I, in the end? A wannabe critic or a shameful enthusiast?

The fact is that bot enthusiasts and censors always seem to miss the point. Take, for example, the article published by <u>Helen Stoilas in The Art Newspaper on July 04</u>. It is quite a good review, but it fails in applying the same attention – and the same, uncritical enthusiasm – to the galleries which sell traditional – and, usually, artistically irrelevant – artifacts to the residents; to the traditional – and, usually, artistically irrelevant – artists who re-invented themselves as avatar artists; and to those who try to experiment with art in this virtual world in not always convincing, but always interesting ways. That's how to say that in 1996 the Internet was a great place for art because you could see that little gallery from Michigan, the photos of an insignificant Lithuanian amateur and <u>Vuk Cosic's CNN Interactive spoof page</u>. Or that TV in the Sixties was enhancing art not only thanks to <u>Gerry Schum's Video Gallery</u> (1969) or the *Spatialist Manifesto for Television* (1952), but also to the first TV auctions…

In my opinion, Second Life will become an interesting place for the art market when you'll sell a piece not just for an handful of Linden $, but for a lot of real $. But it's already an interesting place for experimenting with art, even if many people don't seem to know that…

Some days ago, an Italian art critic, Giuseppe Frazzetto, published on his website <u>an article about Second Life</u>. It is mainly a complaint about the hype of Second Life, with all the topoi of this kind of pamphlet: SL as a pantomime of real life, with millions of open accounts but just a fistful of real residents; SL as a boring,

ugly place, graphically obsolete, absolutely irrelevant if confronted with other synthetic worlds like its eternal enemy, WOW. Most of these things are right, but Frazzetto avoids to make the great question that inescapably arises from them: notwithstanding that, why is SL so attractive for a lot of people?

About art in SL, Frazzetto says: "SL is a virtual world where you basically do what you are already doing. The typical example is that of the artists who aren't able to exhibit in "rl", and so make shows in Second Life. But who see those shows? (besides, SL is so graphically obsolete and even revolting that there's nothing to see there)." Frazzetto, what kind of art have you seen in Second Life? Filthy Fluno? Ah, now it's all clear… I'm joking, but this position doesn't come from ignorance. As the parenthesis makes clear, Frazzetto is looking for beauty: quite a strange quest for a contemporary art critic…

Artists doesn't enter SL looking for beauty, audience and money: not, at least, those who are trying to develop a native art for Second Life. They enter SL because it is a good place to experiment with art, and to reflect on the virtual body, the virtual space, the virtual self, the new meaning of such words as identity, performance, time and space. Because it tries to replicate real life, but it still is completely different from the real world. Because it's ugly, full of companies, money, pornography, politicians and other pretty things that make real life "so different, so appealing". Because it's part of our media environment, in a way WOW will never reach.

"Semiotic phantoms"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, July 30, 2007

In my very first post, I said that the aim of this blog should be to understand what's the meaning of the word "art" in Second Life. However, in the beginning, could be simpler – and even helpful, in order to reach that target – to understand why Second Life can be attractive for an artist operating in real life. Cao Fei is a well known and highly esteemed Chinese artist. In her curriculum she lists a lot of Biennials, and important art centers and museums such as De Appel and Migros Museum in Zurich; she was featured in magazines such as Artforum, Art Review, Flash Art and Modern Painters, and art critics such as Hou Hanru, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Pollack wrote about her work. For the last Venice Biennale, she was invited by Hou Hanru to make a project for the China Pavillion, under the exhibition title Everyday Miracles. She built up a large, multi-chambered inflatable white installation, where the visitor can see *i.Mirror* (2007), her documentary trilogy about Second Life, and visit the virtual replica of the pavilion in Second Life (or is the real world installation a replica of the China Tracy Pavilion in Second Life? No matter…).

China Tracy is Cao Fei's avatar in Second Life. Probably Cao is the very first established artist entering Second Life, and I'm happy of that. Her previous work, from *Rabid Dogs* (2002) to *Cosplayers* (2004), reveals a grasp on simulation, pop culture and the hyper-mediated reality that is perfect to approach Second Life. And in fact, i.Mirror is a great work. The whole project can be explained through what China Tracy said to Wagner James Au in a recent interview: "SL is a lab, a world lab, but it consists in a huge global economic systems. It bring us business and democracy, at the same time with feelings and culture. We can't avoid capitalism's wave; at the same time, we can't avoid Communist aspirations in our heart. This world is not only dualistic, we're inconsistent. Communism is our Utopia, Second Life is our E-topia…

SL is our mirror, it tells us the truth." I don't agree completely with this statement, and that's what makes me quite cool in regards to the choice of the documentary form. I'm quite skeptical about the metaphor of the "second life", whereas Cao Fei seems to take it quite literally.

i.Mirror is a thirty minute movie in three parts. The first is about Second Life as a "place", and it talks about consumerism, capitalism, pollution, the nightmares of the past and the techno-utopia, life and death in a virtual world. The second is about Second Life as a set for stories, as a world in which your life becomes cinema. Quite obviously, China Tracy chooses to tell a love story, HER OWN love story with a fascinating avatar, Hug Yue, in a deeply classical, Hollywood style. The third part, finally, is about "people", and it features, in a beautiful gallery of portraits, the manifold humanity which peoples Second Life.

The reason I like *i.Mirror*, besides its documentary approach, is – first of all – its melancholic atmosphere, so suitable for every "second" life we live, from dreams to virtual worlds; and, secondly, because it betrays it's own premises: it wants to describe SL as a truthful portrait of the real world, but it ends up demonstrating that, the more SL tries to mirror RL, the more it shows its radical difference from it. The mirror is a distorted mirror, and what it shows is more similar to what William Gibson, in his seminal short story The Gernsback Continuum (1981), calls "semiotic phantoms", "bits of deep cultural imagery that have split off and taken on a life of their own".

As for the China Tracy Pavilion in Second Life, located at the Parioli Museum [Parioli (225, 217, 40)], it deserves a different consideration. In my opinion, if you take it as a work of art, it doesn't work at all; but it's fine if you take it as a kind of exhibition device, and as an open door on Second Life for non-residents. The pavilion is a common SL suspended architecture, with a pool where you can sit down and relax; even the mini China Tracy Pavillion car, that you can take for free and drive as a car, is nothing more than a pretty gadget. If you teleport down from the pavilion,

you land in the Parioli Museum, where China Tracy shows the research part of the project, developed with Zafka Ziemia and Rivers Singh. The floor is covered by water, and the museum is full of Italian (mostly Venetian) stereotypes: gondolas, bridges, Italian architectures, Michelangelo's David and so on; in the meantime, some suspended bubbles with image slideshows make you think about hot issues, like sex, politics and religion in Second Life.

So, if (maybe) the project fails in showing to the art world that Second Life is an interesting place to make art, it successfully proves that Second Life – and the relations between the virtual life and the real life – can be an interesting issue for an art project. And that's good, indeed…

Links:

i.Mirror Part 1

i.Mirror Part 2

i.Mirror Part 3

"Re-enact! Or, Just Like the Real World, only Different"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, August 22 and August 23, 2007

"The difference between what is evoked and what is real can even be sensible: I always happen to take no account of it."

I started thinking to post on reenactment some time ago. That's why when I read on -empyre- Patrick Lichty's "missive" on The Issue of Remediation, I was happy and disappointed at the same time: disappointed because he came first, and happy because he showed the way, giving me some points of departure to enter this complicated issue. Let me sum up Lichty's points:

- "ironic tension between the physical and the virtual" vs "affective connection [of the user] to online identity";
- history and memory vs ephemerality and ahistoricity in virtual worlds;
- reenactment of performance-based works as "a way to preserve their degree of affect in space and time" vs reenactment as a way to challange/criticize Performance art.

As for the first point, I completely agree with Lichty. The problem is: which is the target of this irony? Lichty notes that, in the passage from the real to the virtual, an act, for example, of violence, doesn't become "wholly symbolic", because "residents in Second Life clearly have investiture in the avatar as extensions of themselves." That's right, but this observation works only when the victim of violence is your own avatar. In other words, in Second Life this affect takes the shape of self respect, but doesn't produce solidarity for other virtual identities. So, if I'm frightened, worried and even angry when Gazira Babeli confines me in a Campbell's soup can, or when she breaks up my legs with Code Deforma; I don't feel anything similar to what might have felt the audience of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) when Eva Mattes fires Franco Mattes, or when Wirxli Flimflam shoots Great Escape.

In the same time, I believe that these two reenactments of the same performance are coming from a very different order of ideas. In his Paradise Ahead Series (2006 – 2007), Scott Kildall aka Great Escape "captures the anticipation and familiarity of [the] simulated environment by restaging iconic art installations, films and photographs. Using only primitive graphics of Second Life, the documentation of these performances – large-scale prints serves as a historical record of the initial launch point into simulated worlds." His target is the graphic environment of Second Life; or, better, Second Life as an artistic medium. And his message is, I think, that in Second Life reality becomes powerless, ineffective, fake. Even the most emotional, dramatic event, when re-staged in Second Life, becomes a parody of itself. Kildall's prints are more similar to comics than to the source images he used for his remediation. In other words, the medium is stronger than the reality it tries to emulate.

Coming to Eva and Franco Mattes, in their interviews they are very critical about Performance Art: "Eva and me, we hate performance art, we never quite got the point. So, we wanted to understand what made it so un-interesting to us, and reenacting these performances was the best way to figure it out." With their Syntethic Performances, they are questioning the works they recreate, reproposing them in the most literal way in a context where they appear senseless and paradoxical. Their realistic avatar are perfect to this purpose. And in fact, their reenactment of Shoot is more similar to the source, and much more dramatic than Kildall's one: they are not saying that in a virtual world violence is meaningless and reality loses its own drama; they are saying that, in a world anaesthetized by media, the original Shoot is almost as powerless as their own virtual version. In a world where, in front of a car crash, people take pictures with their beautiful smart phones instead of trying to help the victims, Shoot can't be anything more than an interesting spectacle. Video killed the performance art stars. RIP.

In his Missive 3, Lichty asks: "could the remediation of historical works, from 7000 Oaks to sculptures of the David be prime examples of the appropriations of

history in cultural milieus that do not possess them?" I don't think that the answer to this question would be "yes". Believing that Second Life is "a dumpster of the imaginary", the fruit of the collective dream of the amount of its residents, I can't believe that it suffers of a lack of memory. Quite the opposite, I think that Second Life in itself IS memory. Second Life IS remediation. Second Life IS re-enactment, not of our first life – as most people think – not of Snow Crash or The Matrix – as many other people think – but of a sort of mediated unconscious, that is nothing more that our visual culture, and that helps building up the frame through which we look at reality.

Virtual worlds are the places where pop culture, the cyberpunk imagery, cinema, television, postmodern architecture, pornography, contemporary art, literature, design and so on all collapse and mix together to create a new world. Making art, you can choose and recycle one of the bricks of the wall or add your own brick. So, when Eva and Franco Mattes remediate Warhol's portraits, or when Patrick Lichty himself remediates Cicciolina, they point out to a stereotype that is commonplace in Second Life – where most avatars want to be young, sexy, beautiful, photogenic – and they improve it by recalling its historical roots, namely the ideal of beauty imposed by media and pop culture, investigated by Warhol in his Screen Tests and in his tons of portraits, and embodied by Cicciolina in the Eighties. They are improving a memory, rather then creating it ex-novo. This is virtuous recycling. When Dancoyote Antonelli builds up a new installation, he is remediating the aesthetics and the ideals of Cyberart of the Early Nineties, or – better – he is emulating it on a new machine; this is all the new I can find in hyperformalism (and in fact, what is new and fascinating in the hands of Dancoyote Antonelli, appears pretty old-fashioned and overtaken in the hands of DC Spensley); but it's not that bad, because we forgot almost all about Cyberart, and a refresh can be useful…

About the relationship between re-enactments and the original piece, I think the question is really complex, and we can't come out with just one answer. In the press release of the show History will repeat itself. Strategies of Re-enactment in

contemporary (media) art and performance (HMKV at PHOENIX Halle Dortmund, June 9 – September 23, 2007), curator Inke Arns writes: "Artistic re-enactments are not simply affirming what has happened in the past, but rather they are questioning the present via repeating or re-enacting historical events that have left their traces in the collective memory. Re-enactments are artistic interrogations of media images that try to scrutinise the reality of the images, while at the same time pointing towards the fact that collective memory is essentially mediated memory." The show is more about repetition of historical events than of Performance Art of the past, but this observation works also in SL: artists use reenactment as a way (1) to question the present and (2) the way media mediated memory. Besides that, they question (3) the medium they work in (Scott Kildall) and (4) the original work of art (Eva and Franco Mattes), raising questions such as: why is it significant / meaningless to me? why does it work / doesn't work in SL? What does REALLY change when I change the contest and the medium?

This very last question introduces another interesting issue, and another interesting form of re-enactment: what will happen if we start re-mediating Second Life in the real world? This is a really compelling question. We usually think about the relationship between virtual worlds and real life as univocal, even if many events – from the Columbine massacre to cosplaying – showed us that it is definitely bi-univocal. Some artists already started to work on that, with interesting results: from Eddo Stern's SCA Arab Intervention (2004) to Brody Condon's *Death Animations* (2007), in which an actor performs the death animations of a videogame. Concerning SL, I know just a few examples, such as Goldin+Senneby's Objects of virtual desire (2006) and Aram Bartholl's *Tree* (2007), an unfinished "virtual" tree brought to the public space. But what will happen if, let's say, Second Front will start performing in real life, or Gazira Babeli will rebuild her provocative installations in the real space? Then we'll see that virtual worlds are not "just like the real world", as many people think, but something completely different.

"Displaced Familiarity. Interview with Scott Kildall"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, August 31, 2007

Scott Kildall is a visual artist currently living in San Francisco, where he is working as a fellowship artist with the Kala Art Institute. In 2006 he received an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Starting in 2001, he put together a huge body of work in a variety of media including video installation, sound architecture, electromechanical sculpture and single-channel video projection.

Being interested in issues such as "dislocation, transition and emotional upheaval" and in the "exploration of anticipatory moments", it's no surprise that he was attracted by Second Life, where he become Great Escape, the purple-faced member of the Second Front performance group, that he co-founded in 2006. There he anticipated the re-enactment trend with his print series Paradise Ahead, and there he is developing (together with artist Victoria Scott) his last project, No Matter, one of the winners of the Mixed Realities Commissions organized by Turbulence.org and Ars Virtua (see the end of this interview for more details on the project). By the way, No Matter is not the first fruit of this collaboration: in 2006 they made, for a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, *2×2*, an interactive (that doesn't mean digital) installation about the psychology of online social networks: basically, a message board with a grid of holes where people can put their messages (written on rolled-up post-its), read and take away messages left by other people in an evolving, "anonymous and public information system".

I interviewed Scott about Paradise Ahead, a series of 12 large scale digital prints which documents re-enactments of historical performances – but also sculptures, videos and photographs – he made in Second Life, often with the kind help and participation of another Second Life star, Second Fronter Wirxli Flimflam.

DQ. When and why did you start your Paradise Ahead series?

SK. I began working on the series in September 2006; I produced the first performance-print Void [from Yves Klein] in November 2006. I followed this with Shoot [from Chris Burden] in December. I finished the last one in the series of twelve in May 2007.

When I began exploring in Second Life, the unlimited real estate captivated me. I saw an extension of the California dream. Empty structures populated the landscape. Various architectures and landscapes fused in dreamlike configurations. The geography indexed a cultural desire for a world that both conforms to and escapes the ailments of modern life.

My research led to making artworks of remediation of iconic performances, sculptures and video. These produce a feeling of displaced familiarity. At the same time they link Second Life back to what has been done in the physical world while asserting the primacy of the document in the artwork itself. Here, I place the geography in the background of the prints while still examining questions of the body in a simulated world.

DQ. What's the meaning of the title?

SK. The title refers to Milton's Paradise Lost, which details Satan's fall from the heavens and subsequent interference with humankind. In the last 400 years due to advancements in science and philosophy, spiritual space has slowly collapsed, favoring a singular physical reality. Milton's poem was the last of an era – when the concept of a soul space equaled that of reality.

Second Life opens an alternate space – one that resembles our physical reality but doesn't exist in any sort of tangible spatial-time grid. The potential is huge. I see many in Second Life looking for transcendental experience. What interests me with this series is capturing those common feelings of hope and fear associated with this

re-spatialized world.

DQ. Why did you choose to translate this series of performances into a series of prints, rather than videos?

SK. The original artworks exist in our cultural memory as single frames. Yves Klein's Leap Into the Void is a photograph; Maurizio Cattelan's The Ninth Hour is a sculpture. While the video documentation of Chris Burden's Shoot is available in galleries and even on YouTube, it is this one image before he is shot that propagates throughout art history books.

These documents serve an archival purpose and feel frozen in time. They embody a pastness to them related to the role of the photograph. I wanted to mirror the role of the archived document and capture the feel of this simulated world in 2006-2007. In 20 years, I'll look back at these and think that was what Second Life looked like as a snapshot.

I considered using video, but I felt that this would dilute the tension inherent in the content of each of these performances. An avatar viewed in mid-air after leaping from a building captures the state of being in-between; in a video the avatar would land unharmed in an act of slapstick comedy. By using a single image, I let the viewer resolve the consequences of the action.

DQ. Among the works you recreated in Second Life (not only performances, but also sculptures and photographs), there are not only historic pieces, but also some very recent works. Why? How did you choose them?

SK. My starting point was with conceptual art performances of the 60s and 70s that were captured on video. This is a turning point in performance art where the mediated environment began superceding live performance. A small number of

people have seen one of the Yoko Ono's Cut Piece performance; many times more have watched the video in galleries and museums. The video has both eclipsed and substituted for the performance.

Many recent works have progressed this experience of the mediated environment. Doug Aitken's Electric Earth is an eight-channel installation dependent on the viewer walking through the space. But, the lone image of the shopping cart in the parking lot is what lingers. Even in a recent artist talk I saw by him, he showed a few minutes of single-channel video of the shopping cart scene played from his computer. He didn't even mention that it was a multi-channel installation!

The Ninth Hour by Maurizio Cattelan depicts a sculpture of the pope after being struck by a meteorite. But the photographs make the figure look so real that it seems like a person doing a live performance. From viewer's vantage point, the media gets obscured. Although we read that this is a sculpture, it feels just like a still from a performance piece.

DQ. I read *Paradise Ahead* as an effort to question Second Life as a medium of representation of reality. It's like if you are saying: if other media (such as video, photo, installation etc.) are able to reproduce reality, Second Life totally betrays it. You can't preserve it's own emotional atmosphere: tragedy becomes parody, the drama is completely lost… Am I right?

SK. The experience in Second Life can't be captured through media. Any sort of representation appears as an unreality but when operating your avatar, it feels real in many ways. I see a chasm in between viewer and producer that is greater than in video or photography. Because the prints directly refer to other works, we can look at comparisons to other media.

Most people I talk to about Second Life have never ventured into the environment. Many think the prints are from a video game, but then something

doesn't make sense. The scenes are obviously staged and feel familiar. The 3D graphics are unsophisticated compared to current game engines.

Because the prints are indirect in representation but figurative in content, audiences have vastly different reactions. Some see them as emotionally bereft, others as satire and some as hyper-dramatic. I am compelled by the various reads on the works as they point to our collective notions of emotional content in surreal space.

DQ. If simulated worlds can't be used to reproduce reality, what you – as an artist – can do with them?

SK. Simulated worlds compel me precisely because they fail to reproduce reality. Besides the disembodied actions and 3D graphics, there are many other layers of socialization and economies that diverge from real life. I'm most interested in the gaps between the desired representation and the actual result. From here, I examine at how others relate to the dissonances in the simulated – whether it is as a viewer, performer or active participant.

I am currently working on a Turbulence commission called No Matter in collaboration with Victoria Scott. We are commissioning builders to make "imaginary objects" – material things that have never existed in pure physical form such as the Holy Grail, Excalibur, Schrödinger's cat and The Book of Love. Also studying the virtual economy, we will pay them Second Life wages, which are below minimum wage. We will extract these models and print them as foldable paper models. At the exhibition, viewers will assemble these on factory-style tables into 3D paper forms using scissors and glue. The get paid the same Second Life wages. Afterwards we will sell the models of eBay as finished artworks.

With projects like this as well as my continued work in the performance art group, Second Front, I've seen an incredible amount of artistic space in simulated

worlds. I think artists are just starting to uncover other areas for exploration. The combination of simulated space and massive social interactions is unique. Between a whole other concept of space and a semi-anonymous relational environment, there are many facets beyond the reproduction of reality to artistically explore.

"Second City"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, September 24, 2007

Let's say it: Second City, German artist's Aram Bartholl curatorial project for Ars Electronica 2007, was far from being a success. OK, it was raining, and the rain changed the sandbox/beach (called Lido) installed in Pfarrplatz into a morass, and dropped merciless onto the heads – and the mood – of the "residents". But is that the only one reason? Second City failed – at least, partially – notwithstanding the strength of some of the projects shown, in spite of the fact that it was the first important show organized in real world and devoted to art propagated from the Metaverse, and under the umbrella of a credible institution such as Ars Electronica.

It's clear that the concerns that most of the hacktivism-open-source-new-media-art world feels for Second Life didn't played in favor of Bartholl's project; but, in the same time, it's clear that Second City made no effort in order to dissipate these concerns. The most common claim you could hear stretching your legs in Marienstrasse was: "Good advertisement. Did Linden Labs pay for it?"

Lindens didn't layed out a cent for it. At least, they were not among the sponsors of Goodbye Privacy (even if there was, among them, an Austrian company called Second Promotion, specialized in "promoting brands and products in Second Life in such a way that it will enhance the experience the users have with the products and brands"); and Bartholl seems all but an hype-victim, at least according to what he said (or wrote on the keyboard of his Chat installation) during the conference Everything you ever wanted to know about Second Life (Kunstuniversität Linz, September 8, 2007). Maybe, Ars Electronica is an hype-victim: but even this point could be highly debatable. So, what went wrong with Second City?

My opinion is that Bartholl failed in attempting to apply the concept of his own work to the whole show. Educated as an architect, Bartholl works (through

workshops, installations and performances) on the impact of the habits and the metaphors of the digital world on our daily life. On his website, he raises questions such as: "In which form does the network data world manifest itself in our everyday life? What comes back from cyberspace into physical space? How do digital innovations influence our everyday actions?" In his projects, Bartholl wrongfoots us adapting objects, icons and other elements of our life on the screen to the real world. For example, *Map* (2006) relocates in the real streets the Google Maps' red marker, exactly where Google's highly realistic satellite visualizations show it; *DIY* (2004) reproduces the green rhombus which hovers as a three-dimensional marking over the head of the active figures in The Sims Online; *De_Dust* (2004) makes some strange crates covered with the wood texture used in the computer game Counter-Strike appear in real public spaces; *WoW* (2006) invites the passers-by to walk along the streets with their own nickname hovering above their heads, as in WoW and in Second Life; *Missing Image* (2007) is a playful transformation of a texture graphic error from Second Life into a t-shirt; *Speech Bubble* and *Chat* (2007) invite you to communicate through a comic-strip-like dialogue balloon projected above the speaker's head, as in many virtual worlds. Bartholl's work discusses the one-way relationship between our real and virtual lives, and in doing that puts us in a third dimension in which these two worlds are mixed together.

So: if there is any "spawn of the surreal", Bartholl must be accounted among its best children. BUT – try to apply this concept to a whole block; take a street (let's call it Marienstrasse) and a square (namely, Pfarrplatz) and fill them up with notecards, advertisements and freebie boxes; put nicknames over the heads of the visitors and make them talk through speech bubbles; take all this imaginary from a single virtual world (let's call it Second Life): and, all of a sudden, all the magic and the surreal quality of this operation fades, and you find yourself into a gigantic advertisement. A frame that makes difficult for you to experience in the right way projects such as Terminal Air (by the Institute of Applied Autonomy), which deals with the "extraordinary transfers" organized by CIA in the US for the arrested terror suspects;

a frame which even betrays the spirit of things happening in Second Life, such as the Synthetic Performances by Eva and Franco Mattes, which deal in a critical way which the issues of body, sex and violence in virtual worlds.

That said, one might argue that another problem of Second City is that in the show you don't find any of the artists animating the art scene in Second Life. Where is Gazira? Where are Adam Ramona, Juria Yoshikawa, Second Front, The Port, Avatar Orchestra Metaverse and so on? Where are Odyssey and Ars Virtua? I can understand these questions, but I don't agree with them. Even if the curatorial concept was quite open, these things didn't fit in it. Bartholl is most interested in the consequences of virtual lives in the real world, and chose the works featured in the show according to this concern. And some of them were really interesting: Havidol, by **Justine Cooper**, is a fictitious marketing campaign to launch a new wonder drug designed to treat "dysphoric anxiety attacks due to a deficiency of social esteem and retail spending"; Übermensch / Become Your Avatar, by **Joachim Stein**, through modern training methods, pharmaceutical supplements and plastic surgery helps you become as good-looking as your avatar, dealing with the issue of self-representation in virtual worlds; In Your Hands, by the British artist Dash Macdonald, lets installation visitors remote-control the roller skates strapped to the artist's feet; while another project dealing with the "avatarization" of the human (Intrigue_E by SILVER and Hanne Rivrud) is a public performance in which a person, not immediately identifiable, is literally "played" via cellphone by the artists, acting as an unpredictable virus in a social context.

Not a complete success, but not a failure: Second City has been a problematic show that, for the first time, raised some question that we – curators and artists dealing with virtual worlds – have to take into serious account: what's the meaning of making art into a private virtual world? How can we bring this – in my opinion, highly valuable – experiences in the real world without making it seem corporate advertisement? If you have an answer, please make me a call…

"A silent, ironic criticism. Interview with Aram Bartholl"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, September 26, 2007

Second City – the show "curated" (reading on you will understand why I use the quotation marks) in Linz by the German artist Aram Bartholl – has been – no doubts – one of the cardinal points of Ars Electronica's last edition, Goodbye Privacy. The show disseminated through the city was highly representative of the "nice side" of surveillance in the age of digital exhibitionism, an issue that was at the core of the Festival. "Showcasing ones customized persona, staging ones own image is the order of the day. Feature yourself or its GAME OVER, dude!", wrote the curators Christine Schöpf and Gerfried Stocker.

As one of the first big shows raising the issue of art and virtual worlds, Second City has been an important show, and a point of departure for further research. In the same time (and for the same reason), it has been an highly problematic show, too. People liked the idea to bring the exhibition to the city and the streets, but there was a lot of mumbling and discussion about an approach that, for many, was superficial and looked like promotion. As you may guess from the previous post, I agree with this criticism, but what Bartholl is saying below made the show more clear to me – and made me more indulgent to the show. Hopefully, it will be the same for you…

DQ. How is the project born?

AB. Ars Electronica asked me this spring if I was interested in doing a concept and design for Second City – Marienstrasse. The idea of going into public space and Second Life as a topic of Marienstrasse existed already then. I was quite excited about the idea and developed several workshops and projects. In the beginning I was not sure which role I should play: curator or artist. I decided to put emphasis on being

artist showing several projects at Marienstrasse related to Second Life. Which means I didn't curate Marienstrasse although I brought in some artists in cooperation and had some influence. In the end my name was on top for whole Marienstrasse, which is an honor but also a great responsibility, as I realize now. My interest has been more into developing and showing, rather than "curating".

DQ. Did you encounter any difficulties in organizing it?

AB. Of course there have been many difficulties in organizing. Very basic elements like electricity infrastructure in Marienstrasse took a lot of time. So in the end when the festival started Marienstrasse was as buggy as Second Life. But also the process of choosing and decisions in developing projects took quite some time. It has been the first time that I worked on a project of this size and I think I learned a lot.

DQ. Are you satisfied of the results?

AB. Good question. First of all I was happy that in the end more or less all the parts were put together and things worked. But with some distance after the exhausting week of Ars I questioned this myself. I think you made a good point in your article on Second City, which I already also noticed. I do work in a very simple way of transferring elements or situations from virtual world to physical space. Every single of these projects has its own quality and is contrasted by public space. But adding too many of these transformations up in one spot takes away the effect. I tried not to rebuild a complete scenario. But in the end, yes, maybe we had too many of these virtual elements in Real Life.

DQ. What did you like more in the project?

AB. The moment when a new project comes alive is always most exciting. Does

it work? Do people react to it? Testing <u>Chat</u> for the first time on the market place was really fun. To see how four <u>trees</u> are build and set up is very exiting. The Synthetic Performances of Eva and Franco I did like a lot. Despite the rain I think the concept of putting an exhibition in a street worked out very well. The chinese restaurant / blumenberg food cooking in the yard was my favorite place.

DQ. What would you change in the project if you could put together a follow-up?

AB. There is a lot which could be done different, sure. Yes right, the in-world part involving Second Life inhabitants and artists was missing. There have been some attempts but not serious enough to set up a parallel program in SL. I concentrated mostly on Real Life interventions developing installations and workshops. I am aware that one general Second Life panel is not enough to discuss all aspects of the development. All my projects involve a critic view on digital worlds including Second Life. But they do it in a silent and ironic way. This is probably not enough in a context like Second City. More criticism and discussion is needed. Next time I'll make sure what position I am in.

DQ. How can we organize a show about virtual worlds without making it seem corporate advertisement?

AB. Difficult. In general this question fits to many of my projects. A giant Google pin is perfect advertisement. Sure, this kind of topic should also involve other virtual worlds than just Second Life. We had the plan for an overview on Metaverses and history for the exhibition but unfortunately it hasn't been realized. On the other hand Second Life polarized a lot this year. People love it or hate it. For me it is just a tool and a new development. I am curious about when Google will enter the market…

DQ. Can you say something about your new project, Sandbox Berlin?

AB. I developed the sandbox concept for Second City, where the beach at Pfarrplatz was realized instead. I think the possibility of creating and collaboration are the most important parts of Second Life. I love the bizarre Sandboxes. These and some very view other places are totally different to what we know or are used to. Quoting from the introduction of the project: "The Sandbox in Second Life is a place where all conventions are abandoned. It is the real wild west of the already untamed Second Life. The Sandbox is like a three-dimensional sketchbook. Every day, thousands of users leave their tracks here: abstract forms, digital building sites and house-car-plane clichés form a collective surrealistic dream scenario. In a world without rules, inventive users programme swarms of screaming Sponge Bobs which other users pursue. Anti-gravitational bubbles or whole fields of alarm sirens impede concentrated work. The Sandbox is a kind of black market emporium of digital objects and their programs.

The formal chaos and absurd situations generate a particular atmosphere of digital roughness and originality that can only be found here."

Sandbox Berlin translates this field of experimentation into public space in Real Life. In a three-day workshop, production of custom objects in a spontaneous and collaborative process will be tested in Real Life. Everyone is invited to join us on a deserted area, formerly part of the Berlin Wall, in the Mitte district, to build whatever they want. Tools, wood and other materials will be provided by Sandbox Berlin, so that flexible groups can quickly design and materialize objects." Everyone can take part in the project, simply registering by e-mail. Spontaneous participation and visits to the workshops are welcome, completely in the spirit of Second Life.

"Troubles in Paradise. How happened that an artist was banned from the Odyssey Sim"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, October 8, 2007

Some days ago (namely on Saturday, October 06, 18:42 Second Life time), an artist was banned from Odyssey. No playing: Odyssey, well know in Second Life as the most free, open-minded context for artists and performers, the place where Gazira Babeli set her retrospective and where most of Second Front's performances took place, for the first time seems to set a limit to the freedom of its own residents. Someone ate the forbidden apple, and was expelled from Paradise.

This is, at least, what we could understand reading a current thread on Rhizome. But what really happened that awful day? How can we explain it? Let's start from the beginning.

Salvatore Iaconesi, alias xdxd, is an Italian new media artist, activist and open source coder who did an impressive amount of work in many fields, ranging from generative art to artificial intelligence, from performance to code poetry to interactive installations. Some months ago, he entered Second Life and he did some un-authorized installations at Ars Virtua and in other places. In many private and public discussions, he never made a mistery of his criticism against Second Life. As most of the best artists inside there, he is conscious to be in a technically limited environment, where most of the things pretending to be "art" are childish efforts, miles and miles away from what we currently call "contemporary art". But the fact that he kept on working in Second Life demonstrates that he sees in it an interesting socio-cultural context, where he can play with its human (or inhuman) dynamics. Or, in his own words: "I really don't even value Second Life so much. Want to know what i find interesting in it? the social-niche mindfucker that it became, and the way that it has been exploited from mass media, and the mechanisms behind mediocre people using it to gain attention, and a badly-recycled form of human nature struggling to come out

over there, too.''

So, he subscribed the Odyssey community and, during the Gate event, he sent out a robot avatar who talked with other avatars in German, using fragments coming from Franz Kafka's books, and he hacked another's artist work filling it up with jelly polygons. He called this performance I love recursiveness. I was aware of the first performance and I liked it, since it played with SL's "social software" and had a kind of surreal effect that I can't praise more.

As for the second act, it is more debatable, since it was an act of vandalism against another's artist work. I will come back to this issue soon. By now, we have to think about one of its consequences: it made the sim crash. Odyssey crashed during the Gate event, a four days long streaming between Odyssey and the iMAL Art Center in Bruxelles I helped organizing, an open stage for performance and interaction with a real life audience. And this is a problem.

At this point, another actor got into the drama. Sugar Seville is Odyssey's manager. That means that she is responsible in front of the artists and the visitors of what happens on her island – and, in that particular occasion, she was responsible in front of iMAL and its audience. She contacted xdxd and she banned him from Odyssey. Good? Wrong? In my opinion, she did the right thing: that was her role in the drama. She had to protect herself, her place, her audience and her artists, and she did it. Xdxd's work was an act of griefing – no matter if there was an artistic statement behind it.

Now Xdxd is playing the role of the victim on Rhizome: but that's just the last development of a screenplay he wrote down from the very beginning. As he told me in a private conversation, the crash was part of this screenplay: "the crash caused by overload was part of the performance… It's a criticism against the infrastructure (social, technological, perceptive), a criticism which included the server's crash." And he was happy when he was banned from Odyssey: complete success!

"People take themselves seriously on a platform that don't let you to do it. You ban me from your own space in SL? I can come back whenever I want. How can you take seriously this thing? What does it mean?" This is Xdxd's point. He wanted to demonstrate that, in virtual environments, you are never safe, you can't preserve your own property, you can't apply "the rules of property and commerce" which work well in real life. Did he succeed?

At the beginning I though, as Lee Wells does, that Xdxd simply chose the wrong target, and that his performance is more similar to real vandalism than to graffiti. But Xdxd's words reminded me another similar artist's performance, happened some years ago. In February 1999, 0100101110101101.ORG (yes, Eva and Franco Mattes) downloaded all the contents of another artist-run website (Hell.com) and uploaded them on their own website. Hell.com described itself as a "private parallel web", closed to non invited visitors. Fighting against this kind of use of the web, 0100101110101101.ORG put online an "anticopyright version", open to everyone. No matter who was right or wrong: two completely different visions of the Net were fighting against each other. Hell.com blamed 0100101110101101.ORG for theft and threatened them with an international lawsuit for copyright violation. This was good in two ways: because they had the right to do it and because, doing this, they successfully completed the drama written down by 0100101110101101.ORG.

Now a similar thing is happening. Two completely different visions of virtual worlds are fighting against each other. The first says that virtual life is completely different from real life, and that you can't import in virtual worlds concepts such as property and business. Who minds if I vandalize an artwork? Com'on, its digital! Who minds if I break down a gallery's window? They are just polygons!
The second claims that there is not so much difference between virtual and real life, maybe because our real life more and more relies on virtual laws; that property is valid also in virtual life, and that a criminal gesture is not less dangerous because it relies on an artistic statement; that things must be taken seriously in virtual worlds, because more and more people are taking them seriously.

Personally, I think that there are no such things as chimeras and truths. A chimera becomes the truth when enough people believe in it: that's good for God, peace and democracy, and even for art: why it can't be good for virtual lives? If most of the people believe that what they are doing in virtual worlds is REAL, it is. If most of the people think that vandalizing an artwork in Odyssey is like doing it in a real gallery, they are right. And Xdxd is wrong.

That said, I love recursiveness is a nice piece of art not because (as Xdxd says) of its relationship with other examples of provocative contemporary art, but because it raised a problem and a discussion. In the same time, Sugar did the right thing banning him from Odyssey, because she made the performance succeed; and she'll do an even better thing readmitting him on Odyssey, as she suggests at the end of the chat. Because irresponsibility is for children and artists, and Xdxd is not a child. Maybe he is a crap artist (I don't think so, indeed), but how many crap artists are in Second Life?

"Being an avatar, the virtual is my focus". Interview with Sugar Seville
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, November 27, 2007

When talking about art in Second Life, it's difficult not to talk about **Odyssey**. Almost everyone working in the art field seems to converge, before or later, on the Odyssey Simulator. In the beginning there were Gazira Babeli, Second Front and Ian Ah; then came Juria Yoshikawa, Aldomanuzio Abruzzo, Fau Ferdinand, the Ludic-Society crew (Superfem Beebe and MosMax Hax), Avatar Orchestra Metaverse and Adam Nash among others; and many more will come, be sure.

Not that Second Life is missing places for art, even bigger, more official and more respected than Odyssey. There is Ars Virtua, a well-reputed new media art center founded in 2005, with its two exhibition spaces and its AVAIR program for artists in residence, organized in conjunction with Turbulence. There is NMC Campus, an experimental effort of the New Media Consortium, a powerful association gathering nearly 250 learning-focused organizations dedicated to the exploration and use of new media and new technologies. And there is, above all, Burning Life, an annual festival set up by the Lindens from the beginnings of Second Life in homage to the legendary Burning Man festival, the official – and more visible – platform for art in Second Life.

But Odyssey is different, someway. Maybe because, as its co-founder Sugar Seville says in this interview, it's more a community than an exhibition space. Maybe because it's an open, free space, where almost everyone can propose a project, where there is no censorship, no limits (besides, obviously, technological limits and quality standards), and where the first guy was temporarily banned, with some regrets, just some days ago. Or maybe because of the approach of it's manager, who sees herself more as an affectionate gardener than as the chief of a burgeoning art venture…

DQ. What's, in your own vision, the Odyssey project? Why did you launch it?

SS. I started out with a bunch of land in Yanguella, a region on the mainland of Second Life, back in November of 2006. I opened it as a kind of artists sandbox for all my friends in SL. At that time I was really just having fun in SL, and it wasn't always art related. I was playing with the idea of opening a crazy space-age 1960′s style bar modeled after Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange" and "Barbarella", when I found that the people that I was spending the most time with were artists like Gazira [Babeli], Wirxli [Flimflam], Man [Michinaga], Chi5 [Shenzhou]. There was a high level of creative energy that was being concentrated around the Bitfactory which was next door and later became Man Michinaga's "I Am Columbia" sim. Gazira's scripted works and the initial performances by Second Front at Bitfactory were inspiring to me, and told me that SL had potential beyond the commercial wasteland that so much of it is. I knew I wanted to explore this potential.

Making art on mainland caused a bit of turmoil in the neighborhood, and I'll confess that my own antics played no small part. There is a line between art and griefing, and it's not really very well defined. Mainland SL is the wild frontier, and to this day pretty much anything goes, so it was kind of fun brushing up against people that had no understanding or for that matter tolerance for art. After a while it degenerated into an ugly battle ground, with walls of red type going up everywhere. The outcome was that the meanest people in the area won, and the artists all left; not unlike the real world where real estate agents take over artists neighborhoods. After this experience, I wanted to provide a kind of sanctuary for all my friends that I felt were doing important explorations into art and performance. Somehow I convinced Pacino [Hercules] to buy an island and let us all play there, actually this was something that he really wanted to do. My reasoning was that if we all created interesting content people would come, we would be able to set up some rentals and shops to help pay the bills, and there would be a place where artists could present thoughtful meaningful work with the support of a community of like minded

individuals. At the time Linden was offering a great deal on private islands, so it wasn't that much money, and if it didn't work out the island could be sold for a profit, so we did it. I didn't really know exactly what would become of Odyssey, but I felt that if I nurtured it, there would be growth, and that's in fact what has happened! We still don't have any retail operations on Odyssey outside of sales of art work, but there is a plan to do so. The idea is to sell editions, books, interesting clothing and furniture etc. to help cover the costs of renting the servers.

DQ. How did the project evolve in time? What are your future projects and your ambitions?

SS. The one thing I have always said about Odyssey is that it is foremost a community, and that everything that the simulator is used for must play a part in the community. There are no private areas on Odyssey, and the only person that has a house is Pacino, and he let's everyone use it. When I give someone land to use or set them up for a rental, we agree first on this principal of openness and sharing that is so critical to any SL community.

My role has really just been as an orchestrator, or as Ian [Ah] likes to call me, an arts administrator (sounds official, I like that one). When someone approaches me with an idea, I try to make it happen. Early on I was just inviting artists to come and do whatever, this produced a lot and is embodied in the Ian Ah squat – a sort of homeless camp set up under the observation deck on Sugar Mountain. Ian never really asked me if he could build something. I just gave him perms to do so, and in a few weeks he had built out almost a third of the sim! Then I had to start being an administrator and manager, which is not always easy.

What has evolved is the result of many contributors, among them Ian, Wirxli, Gazira, Beavis [Palowakski], Chi5, Man Michinaga, DeThomas [Dibou], Esther [DeCuir], the Mattes, Miulew [Takahe], Max [Maximillian Nakamura], Evo

[Szuyuan]… the list goes on. I really don't see the project as mine alone, it's kind of an organism that has a life of it's own, all I have to do is water it and tend to the details.

There have been some projects on Odyssey that I instigated. Commissioning the build of the ExhibitA gallery was one, and co-curating the first two shows there, were big projects. I was really happy about how Beavis's build and Gazira's show, [collateral damage], turned out. I'm working on a follow up to [collateral damage] at the moment, I think it will be a group show with Second Front and the Mattes amongst others. The hard part about collaboration is relying on other people to do what they say they're going to do, so not all plans work out, especially when people are donating their time. There are a few new projects in the works, Adam Nash [Ramona] has created a site specific installation on our new sim to the east, and I am collaborating on a show about virtual architecture in SL with Malcolm Smith and Object gallery in Sydney that is being hosted on East of Odyssey as well. I hope more projects will come up through the network as we get in to winter, preferably ones with funding. I look forward to Art Metropole picking up again in the fall and opening their space on the north east corner of the island.

I am also working on getting funds established for artist residency grants on Odyssey. This would allow artists to cover real life expenses while they devote time to a work created on Odyssey, or to hire builders to work under an artists direction – thus freeing them from the burden of learning the SL toolset. We have already done this to some extent with a few artists, by giving them land to use. I would like to be able to draw the attention of established artists from the real world to explore the possibilities in SL, so a monetary grant would be a nice incentive.

DQ. I find very interesting that, in Second Life, the most open, free and various art community gathered around a place (such as Odyssey) opened not by a new media art institution or something like that, but by a web publishing corp

which conceived it – I guess – to reinforce its own image in SL. How do you explain that?

SS. Dynamis is a company in London that resells businesses and provides online services for business. It is headed up by Pacino Hercules (Marcus Markou), whom I met in SL in late 2006. We each had our own ambitions of creating a place for artists to play, but I was the one with the time to put it together, so Pacino offered to fund the server costs. He has from the start, generously given me complete control, and I think there is wisdom in that decision on his part. It was his idea to start the Odyssey website, and to use Ning, which is an excellent service, but he doesn't want to tell us what to do. I have in turn been able to extend his generosity to artists by delegating resources and contributing hundreds of hours of my own time to manage and build.

Dynamis is keen on being an early adopter of the technology that SL provides, and own another island that is devoted solely to their business ventures. For all intents and purposes, Odyssey is funded out of a philanthropic interest in supporting works of high artistic merit in SL, but that's not to say that our supporters don't see an investment potential. In the end what is being created is a concentration of rich content that draws visitors, and where there are people there is potential for commerce.

That said, Odyssey is not about making money, and there will never be huge rotating billboards advertising products or any form of overt commercialism. The way the world is though, artists need money, just as museums and galleries do. Odyssey is no different and I see us finding ways to cover costs and fund more projects by using the same kind of methods that real world arts institutions do. I think Dynamis is getting a fantastic opportunity to play the role of patron for such a thriving creative community, and will benefit in much the same ways that arts patrons have traditionally in the real world.

So, yes it may seem odd that an internet company is co-founder and supporter of a place like Odyssey, until you understand that they are fulfilling the same role that is

a critical component to the function of any real world arts organization. Corporate sponsorship of the arts is nothing new.

DQ. What's the relationship between art and business in SL? Do you think that artistic experimentation – even the most radical, conceptual and self-referential – can be inspiring and useful for business?

SS. I don't think you should mix art and business any more than you should mix religion and politics – but they still have to coexist and provide the vital roles that they do. As soon as you have business interfering in the creative work of artists, art is being compromised, and that can not be allowed to happen.

Again, corporate sponsorship of the arts goes way back, and before there were corporations, there was the Medici family, and so on. I think if there are artists creating meaningful works in SL, they will be well served by patronage of some form, and those that support have much to gain in contributing to the opening of this new territory to art. If you think about it, commerce is easy – just set up a business selling whatever. Creating culture is something else. I don't think you could buy culture if you wanted to. So naturally the smart business people that have the means, support the arts. The benefits are more than monetary.

DQ. What kind of art are you most interested in? Multimedia installation? Performance? Aesthetic research or conceptual pieces?

SS. It's hard to say that I like one form of art over another, and while my human has a wide range of interests in real world arts; being an avatar, the virtual is my focus. SL at the moment is the networked environment that is presenting the most possibilities to artists. Not only does one have an open platform upon which to create, but most importantly, the work can be seen by potentially many more viewers than an artist might normally expect in the real world. The most recent show on Odyssey of

Gazira Babeli drew over 1200 unique visitors and over 1800 total visits in 3 months. I am drawn to works that really use the SL medium in a new way, this early stage is ripe for explorations – so I look for artists that are really working in the medium of SL and making paths for future exploration.

From the perspective of an avatar, I find performance to be the most interesting art form in SL. SL is a lot of things, but everything comes back to the avatar and has to relate to the avatar in order to really be successful in SL.

The other area that I am interested in is what I term "mixed reality" works. The use of video streaming can be an effective device for mixing real life and second life – but it can also be disastrously ineffective. Presenting a projection of SL in a real life space is essentially just showing one face of a world that is inherently immersive; rendering it bland and dullish. When using streaming video to mix realities, it is important to take into consideration the interactive nature of SL and to build in to a project, ways to convey this experience. A good example of this would be the recent installation of The Gate. Until the real life audience saw a re-projection of themselves in the SL space, they did not make a connection. Over all I think The Gate was a successful integration of real and virtual space. Much still needs to be explored of course, but these early experiments are important as foundations for future works.

There are many galleries, perhaps the majority, that are importing works to SL from the real world. I think it's fine to use SL like a 3D web page, and it can be a great experience to walk through a virtual gallery and see images displayed in a certain way. This type of exhibition is more about the architecture and the context that it creates than it is about the content of the reproductions of paintings and photographs that are being displayed. I've seen many beautiful exhibits of this type in SL, but it's not the direction that I am most interested in.

Mario Gerosa, "Art and Social Networks. An interview with Domenico Quaranta"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, May 7, 2008

MG. Nei social network e nei mondi virtuali sta prendendo corpo un nuovo tipo di arte (è chiaro che in molti social network la gente presenta opere che circolano anche fuori, ma mi riferisco a quelle che hanno una propria specificità). E' un'arte della cultura partecipatoria che spesso viene elaborata da gente che non sempre ha un background culturale artistico. Questa nuova cultura artistica ha dei contorni ben precisi? Si possono ravvisare dei filoni? Nel mio libro, in particolare, mi soffermo sul neokitsch, una nuova tendenza che ho colto e che non carico di un significato negativo, anzi.

DQ. L'arte dei social network e dei mondi virtuali è un fenomeno complesso, difficilmente riconducibile a una unità. Personalmente, farei molta attenzione persino all'utilizzo del termine arte, che con la sua ambiguità rischia di creare dei fraintendimenti difficili da dissipare. Buona parte di questa produzione, infatti, ha poco a che vedere con l'arte contemporanea come siamo abituati a intenderla, e si confronta piuttosto con arti "popolari" come il fumetto, l'illustrazione fantasy, la pubblicità, i manga, il fandom, il cyberpunk, la pornografia delle "digital beauties", HR Giger, certi generi cinematografici, il cinema d'animazione digitale, la moda. L'arte contemporanea, quando è presente, agisce allo stesso livello dei riferimenti già citati: l'immaginario di Matthew Barney e dei fratelli Chapman, ad esempio, risulta spesso un riferimento imprescindibile. Non si tratta di un fenomeno del tutto nuovo, dato che ha precedenti nell'illustrazione underground e nelle fanzine degli anni Ottanta; ma di certo, la rete e i mondi virtuali hanno dato al fenomeno una dimensione e una complessità sconosciute fino ai primi anni Novanta.

Se si guarda a tutto ciò dal punto di vista dell'arte contemporanea, c'è ben poco da salvare. Il fenomeno, del resto, si sviluppa secondo regole proprie, lontane anni

luce dal nitore concettuale e dalla consapevolezza estetica che si richiede a un artista. Bada che non sto facendo una distinzione di valore: sto solo parlando di codici linguistici differenti. Eppure, sono convinto che questi fenomeni stanno avendo, e avranno sempre di più, un impatto decisivo sulla cultura alta, dato che sempre più numerosi sono gli artisti che ce l'hanno nel proprio background, o che scelgono coscientemente di confrontarsi con questo magma ribollente, all'interno del quale avvengono di continuo strane contaminazioni e alterazioni genetiche sorprendenti, in grado a volte di dare una scossa alle estetiche contemporanee. Ad esempio, il fenomeno del neo-barocco, cui sono già state dedicate diverse mostre, e di cui le opere recenti dell'italiano Nicola Verlato sono un ottimo esempio, deve molto a quello che tu chiami neokitsch. Ancora: nessun presunto "innalzamento": si tratta semplicemente di una ibridazione tra codici linguistici.

Personalmente, nel mio lavoro di critico d'arte tendo a collocarmi a questo livello. Guardo con interesse alla fan art e al game modding, ma mi dedico alla Game Art: una pratica artistica che pesca a piene mani nei primi due fenomeni, ma servendosi dei codici linguistici dell'arte contemporanea. La cultura manga mi interessa nei limiti in cui mi aiuta a decodificare l'opera di Murakami, Cao Fei e gli *Annoying Japanese Child Dinosaur* (2007) di Eva e Franco Mattes. Nei mondi virtuali, il mio interesse va più a Gazira Babeli e a Isbiter e Strauss che non a Starax Statosky. Ovviamente, faccio tutto ciò nella consapevolezza che una cosa non potrebbe esistere senza l'altra, ma anche che si tratta di fenomeni fondamentalmente diversi.

MG. Sarebbe ora di definire dei parametri per l'arte dei social network e dei mondi virtuali? Oppure ritieni che in qualche modo possano funzionare le stesse categorie che si applicano all'arte "ufficiale"?

DQ. Altra questione scottante. La creazione di categorie e, inevitabilmente, di gerarchie è sempre vista, da chi lo vive, come il tentativo di "ingabbiare" un fenomeno vitale e fluido, che vive bene anche senza critici supponenti e rompiballe.

D'altra parte, essa costituisce un passo inevitabile in direzione dello sviluppo di un sistema atto a salvare ciò che, abbandonato alla cultura dell'immediatezza di Internet, andrebbe irrimediabilmente perso. Quando si decide di salvare qualcosa, bisogna inevitabilmente fare delle scelte. Noè ha deciso di abbandonare i dinosauri, e i paleontologi non glielo hanno mai perdonato.

Quindi: sì a dei parametri. Non ho dubbi che la maggior parte di essi possano esserci forniti da pratiche precedenti, ma – sulla base di quanto ho detto in precedenza – non credo che la critica d'arte contemporanea possa aiutare molto. Bisogna fare riferimento a un'estetica molto più aperta, che costruisca le sue categorie guardando non solo all'arte contemporanea, ma anche al più ampio bagaglio della cultura pop; e soprattutto, che abbia ben presente l'alto potenziale "ricombinante" delle comunità online, all'interno delle quali l'evoluzione stilistica e l'ampliamento dei modelli è vertiginoso. Per decodificare tutto ciò, parole d'ordine della critica d'arte come "postmoderno", "kitsch", "postproduzione" etc. non bastano più.

MG. Finora ti risulta che qualche critico sia entrato in qualche social network o mondo virtuale per capire cosa c'è veramente di interessante e fare una sorta di censimento?

DQ. Personalmente, sto tentando di fare un lavoro simile su Second Life, con il mio blog *Spawn of the Surreal*. Parto dal presupposto che i mondi virtuali siano una sorta di traduzione in poligoni del nostro inconscio collettivo, o, se vogliamo, della surrealtà a cui i surrealisti cercavano di accedere tramite il sogno, l'ipnosi e le tecniche automatiche come il frottage o il metodo paranoico-critico di Dalì. Alla "prole del surrealismo", ossia agli artisti che operano nei mondi virtuali, basta un login per entrare in questa discarica dell'immaginario e utilizzare in maniera creativa ciò che un secolo di mass media vi ha depositato.

Ovviamente, non sono il primo e nemmeno il solo. Second Life pullula di esploratori, a caccia di arte e di tendenze: Patrick Lichty (che è anche artista), Lythe

Witte, Amalthea Blanc. Ovviamente, non siamo mai d'accordo!

MG. Ci sono musei veri che si siano interessati a questo tipo di arte? Musei che abbiano magari già fatto qualche acquisizione?

DQ. Che io sappia, no. Ovviamente, esiste qualche caso isolato, ma è troppo poco per parlare di interessamento istituzionale. Artport, la galleria online del Whitney Museum, ha ospitato nelle sue "Gate Pages" The Port, una community artistica di Second Life. Eva e Franco Mattes hanno presentato per la prima volta le loro Synthetic Performances (2007) alla Galleria Civica di Trento, e hanno esposto spesso in contesti istituzionali. All'arte in Second Life si sono interessati alcuni festival come il DEAF e (a settembre) Ars Electronica, e sono in programmazione alcune mostre sui mondi virtuali in spazi istituzionali, artistici e non (musei scientifici e università). Esistono centri, come il d/lux media arts di Sydney, direttamente coinvolti nella ricerca sull'arte in Second Life. Venendo alle comunità online, l'Edith Russ Site für Medienkunst di Oldemburg, in Germania, ha organizzato di recente una bella mostra sul tema (My Own Private Reality – Growing up online in the 90s and 00s, a cura di Sarah Cook e Sabine Himmelsbach). Di acquisizioni vere e proprie non ho ancora sentito parlare. Del resto, credo che dopo la crisi dell'interessamento istituzionale per net art e new media a cavallo del millennio, i musei siano diventati molto più prudenti su questo fronte: dopo una fase di stasi, la situazione si sta muovendo, ma in maniera molto prudente.

MG. Si può ipotizzare un mercato dell'arte per le opere che circolano nei social network e nei mondi virtuali? Mi riferisco alle opere di artisti sconosciuti o quasi. Per intenderci, non parlo degli 01.org o di Cao Fei. Qualche galleria si sta già muovendo in questo senso?

DQ. Come ho detto all'inizio, non credo che fenomeni come il neokitsch possano entrare nel mercato dell'arte contemporanea, fatto salvo qualche occasionale e isolato "adattamento" ai suoi codici: ad esempio, so che si vendono molto bene le opere del collettivo russo AES+F (presente quest'anno anche alla Biennale di

Venezia), che con il fenomeno hanno una decisa parentela. Ovviamente, un mercato di nicchia per amatori è decisamente auspicabile, e per certi versi esiste già. Altro discorso per progetti che si collocano consapevolmente sul piano dell'arte contemporanea. Per restare a Second Life, l'ambito che conosco meglio, Gazira Babeli (artista celebre in SL, ma ancora sconosciuta sul mercato dell'arte) ha iniziato una collaborazione con la Fabio Paris Art Gallery, che lavora anche con i Mattes, Ubermorgen.com, Alison Mealey (che viene dal game modding) e Todd Deutsch (che fotografa i Lan Parties). Babeli vende video delle sue performance. In America, Scott Kildall (che opera in SL come membro del collettivo di performer Second Front) ha esposto in diverse occasioni le sue stampe, che documentano alcune sue performance. Jakob Senneby e Simon Goldin, tra i fondatori di The Port, vendono sul loro sito a prezzi interessanti (dai 200 ai 3000 euro) i loro Objects of Virtual Desire, sculture derivate da oggetti d'affezione progettati dagli avatar. È ancora poco, ma è qualcosa.

MG. Sempre a proposito del mercato, capita di vedere opere interessanti realizzate in Second Life da artisti pressoché sconosciuti vendute a cifre irrisorie (10-15 US$) e altre opere proposte a cifre molto maggiori. A cos'è dovuto questo mercato selvaggio? Sono meccanismi che si riscontrano anche al di fuori di questo tipo di circuiti?

DQ. Il mercato dell'arte in SL è un fenomeno molto articolato e ancora privo di regolamentazione. Non esistendo un metodo di certificazione delle tirature, un'opera può essere venduta al prezzo che si vuole, e i prezzi bassi – adatti a una tiratura illimitata, come quella di un poster o un dvd – restano sempre quelli più onesti. Ma ovviamente, il culto che un artista riesce a costruire attorno a se può produrre improvvise impennate di prezzo, esattamente come nel mondo reale.

MG. Presto avremo piattaforme che permetteranno a chiunque di creare un proprio mondo virtuale. In questo caso un artista potrebbe pensare di creare un mondo virtuale visto come un'opera concettuale?

DQ. Sicuramente! In parte, questa via è già stata esplorata, ad esempio dal

collettivo belga <u>Tale of Tales</u>, che ha progettato *The Endless Forest*, un mondo persistente online concepito come opera d'arte. Personalmente, credo molto in questa possibilità, che consentirà agli artisti di sviluppare in una direzione inedita una pratica operativa che ha avuto un peso importante negli anni Novanta: quella dell'arte relazionale, dell'artista come costruttore di nuovi contesti sociali.

MG. Ci sono degli artisti nell'ambito delle arti visive che sono già delle celebrità in qualche social network e che presto verranno scoperti, come è successo a Mika per la musica?

DQ. Non avendo ancora stabilito se sono un profeta o una Cassandra, preferisco non fare nomi. Tuttavia, sono sicuro che accadrà. È nell'ordine delle cose. In parte, ciò è già accaduto a Cory Arcangel, un mito delle comunità online che sta scalando molto rapidamente il sistema dell'arte contemporanea, con una presenza costante sulle riviste di settore e una mostra al MoMA.

MG. Per il momento, tra i vari progetti realizzati in Second Life e creati senza intenzioni artistiche, ne vedi qualcuno che potrebbe essere considerato arte concettuale? Per fare un esempio, poco prima di lanciare Synthravels, l'agenzia di viaggi per i mondi virtuali, chiesi a Christiane Paul del Whitney se poteva essere considerato un discorso di arte concettuale e lei mi rispose di sì.

DQ. E io sono perfettamente d'accordo con lei. Tuttavia, invece che ricondurre all'ambito artistico operazioni nate al di fuori di esso, preferisco pensare che l'arte concettuale abbia avuto un lascito molto ampio, che si può riconoscere anche in progetti sperimentali nati da altre esigenze. Tutto può essere arte, se lo si vuole; e molte cose che nascono come progetto artistico smettono di esserlo loro malgrado. Marco Cadioli ha sviluppato il personaggio di Marco Manray come progetto concettuale di "reporter nei mondi virtuali", ma le riviste non smettono di prenderlo

sul serio e di commissionargli veri servizi per le loro pagine culturali. E ovviamente, molti progetti privi di una intenzionalità artistica risultano concettualmente più interessanti di altre nate come arte: ad esempio, Synthravels, così come Virtual Hallucinations (il progetto di James Cook che vuole informare la gente sulle malattie mentali) sono molto più interessanti del China Tracy Pavillion di Cao Fei. Ma l'arte contemporanea, per essere tale, ha bisogno di una volontà artistica e da un contesto che la riconosca come tale: senza passare per questa gogna, Virtual Hallucinations non sarà mai un'installazione, il che non è necessariamente un male. Una volta il critico Steve Dietz ha scritto che Internet restava infinitamente più interessante della net art. Si potrebbe dire la stessa cosa per i mondi virtuali.

MG. L'arte presente nei social network viene filtrata soltanto da un pubblico popolare, che ne può decretare o meno il successo. Non credi che sia rischioso? In questo modo non si rischia di ignorare qualche artista emergente solo perché non ci sono giudizi sufficientemente affidabili?

DQ. Farei molta attenzione all'uso che fai del termine "popolare". Il pubblico dei social network costituisce una comunità di riferimento, come quello della New Media Art o dell'arte contemporanea. Come tale, è formato, attento, culturalmente consapevole. È con le sue aspettative che si misurano gli artisti. Sta a loro decidere se accontentarle o sfidarle. Ma questo è sempre accaduto: negli anni Dieci, potevi essere un tardo impressionista o Duchamp; nel primo caso potevi mettere in conto un successo immediato, nel secondo ti conveniva ritagliarti una nicchia e aspettare un po'…

"Al dio ortopedico"
First published in *Extrart*, n° 34, April – June 2008

Se Second Life è un mondo, **Gazira Babeli** è il suo dio. Non si spiegherebbe altrimenti la venerazione che suscita, la sua irruzione nel linguaggio comune (gazwork, gazhat, gaz-like), la sua capacità di trasformare tutto ciò che entra in contatto con lei. Persone comprese. Un dio con la "d" minuscola, dato che la maiuscola si addice ai supremi creatori, quei Linden che possono, con un colpo di mano, abbattere tutto ciò che hanno creato, probabilmente in sette giorni. Un dio minore, che scatena terremoti e tempeste di immagini. Un dio ortopedico. Alla festa che ha organizzato per la sua prima personale in una galleria, arrivavano persone che avevano indossato la sua maschera; persone dalle membra stirate, infettate dal virus di *Avatar On Canvas*; persone truccate, come lei, da statua d'oro, o da statua di marmo; persone intente a interpretare tutte le espressioni del loro inventario. Tutti coinvolti in un baccanale a cui ben si addicevano i brandelli di carne che piovevano dal cielo, saturando in fretta l'ambiente. Nella caligine di Locusolus, spinta dalla sua mano di macchinista crudele, l'umanità orrendamente mutila e inesorabilmente manichina, attrezzata alla meglio sé medesima come un melanconico cul-de-jatte, appare fra grandi stridori e cigolamenti sui vasti palcoscenici deserti, guardati a vista dai pesanti scatoloni dei casamenti pieni di caldo e di buio. Ivi l'homo orthopedicus sgrana con voce di carrucola una sua parte impossibile alle statue diseredate dell'antico Egitto. Sotto il torbido smeraldo del cielo i miti ellenici decapitati presentano credenziali alle lattine di zuppa Campbell's; le civiltà si riecheggiano, i grattacieli di marmo si alleano ai rubinetti delle discariche, mentre Duchamp e Ulay s'intendono al primo sguardo del loro unico occhio artificiale.

Abita l'homo hortopedicus in appartamenti che alla prima credereste disabitati. Call center abbandonati in epoca di vacanze; cripte postmoderne zeppe di

armamentario fetish, fatto salvo per le lastre di marmo che inneggiano all'arte povera, per poi mettersi a saltare al primo tremito della terra; ospedali psichiatrici dove le pelli degli internati sono stese ad asciugare; sicché non resta, durante la canicola, che appendere un nudo oleografico di Cicciolina in cima alle scale, sperando che un altro, presto, ne prenda il posto. Altrove, uno scricchiolio lento vi avverte che un furry, per la noia del teletrasporto, si è messo a interpretare pose sadomaso sulla porta dell'Inferno di Rodin, che il l'artista new media si è fatto intrappolare da un tornado, che il newbie si è fatto spedire a migliaia di metri di altezza e via discorrendo.

Se già non fosse chiaro che questo atroce e strambo utilizzo di un mondo virtuale non può che essere arte, verrebbe la voglia di chiedere cosa c'entrano De Chirico e Longhi con Gazira Babeli.

C'entrano, eccome. Per Gazira Babeli, come per Giorgio de Chirico, la tradizione è un punto di riferimento obbligato, ma anche uno dei principali affluenti di quella discarica dell'immaginario in cui la statua classica e il biscotto ferrarese, Nefertiti e Cicciolina riposano, pronte a entrare a far parte di un discorso nuovo. Cercherete invano di farla parlare di cyborg, di software e di altre quisquilie di questo tipo: lei dirà pittura, scultura, teatro. Per questo, e non per altro, Gazira passa come un dio in un mondo di manichini (altrimenti detti avatar). Perché è, a modo suo, un classico.

Kiss the Sky, or, is there art without narration?
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, May 22, 2008

Yesterday morning I spent a couple of hours in Second Life to visit <u>*Kiss the Sky*</u>, an huge exhibition curated by artist **DC Spensley** (**<u>DanCoyote Antonelli</u>** in SL) for the <u>New Media Consortium</u> in collaboration with the Museum of Hyperformalism, directed by DanCoyote himself. *Kiss the Sky* pretends to be the "definitive group exhibition of Hyperformalism", with 37 installations by over a dozen artists: **Chance Abattoir, Vlad Bjornson, nand Nerd, Selavy Oh, Adam Ramona, Nebulosus Severine, AngryBeth Shortbread, Sasun Steinbeck, Sabine Stonebender, Seifert Surface, elros Tuominen, Juria Yoshikawa**, and **i7o Zhu**.

The notecard of the exhibition includes the following definition of Hyperformalism:

> "Hyperformalism is non-figurative abstraction in hyper-medium and has been known to include abstract objects arranged in simulated space, navigable on a network as well as expressions of reactive and interactive artwork behaviors and geometric or algorithmic pattern play in 2, 3, and 4 dimensions. This list is far from comprehensive. Because Hyperformalism is not representational, viewer relationships are less fettered by pre-existing symbolic weight and artworks encourage fascination with form for its own sake. The virtual world provides the ability to liberate the work from scale constraints and provides a perfect context for this post-conceptualist form."

The press release goes on saying that Hyperformalism removes "the comfortable cliché of anthropocentrism", talking about immersion and abstraction, and concluding

that Hyperformalism exceeds our traditional concept of art, because it is "native to a continuum where only the human mind can visit and where the body and the ideological weight of the figure are not the default fixed point of view."

This last point is very important, because I think that the very concept of "nativity" is in the same time the strength point and the deafness point of the hyperformalist strategy (and of all the "not possible in real life" approach). Visiting the exhibition, I was quite surprised to notice that I enjoyed it a lot. In the end of the long tour I was quite bored indeed, but nothing different from any big exhibition of abstract art – or from an exhausting visit to the Venice Biennale. Some works, in particular, gave me a great aesthetic and immersive experience. If you are planning to go and see the show, I suggest you to have a look to *Pulse Points*, by **Nebulosus Severine** – an enormous ice block that can be visited like a room, with some strange sculptures frozen in it like a Siberian mammoth; to the ambitious *Fractus V*, a colossal kinetic sculpture which made me think to Boccioni and Pomodoro for its bronze-like textures; to **Juria Yoshikawa**'s works, in particular *Spiny Bumblebee Abstract*; to the ambiguous, surreal sculptures by **Chance Abattoir**; and, finally, to a classic by **Adam Ramona**, the wonderful *A Rose Heard at Dusk* previously installed on Odyssey.

1. Everything, in SL, is constructed. Is everything art?

I enjoyed these works, really. Or, better said, *my avatar enjoyed them*; he had some interesting experiences, like every time he discovers something new in SL, being it art or not. This is one of the first problems coming to my mind, and one of the things that prevents me to fully enjoy Hyperformalism. Everything, in SL, is constructed. Everything can be art. Do we have to rely on what people say about their work, or on what the New Media Consortium suggests to call art? Yes and no. The answer is related to what we think SL is.

2. Is SL an art world?

So, what is SL? A software or a world? If it is a world, probably there is an "art world" in it. That is, in **Howard S. Becker**'s words (1982), a group of people "whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art." Artists, critics, collectors, galleries, institutions and so on. You don't need a great experience of SL to know that you can find in it all the key figures who build up an art world. So, SL has an art world and Hyperformalism is its avantgarde. Since it can be understood only by people living in that world, and belonging to that art world, no surprise if it is not recognized by any RL community. Better, there's no need for that: art, to exist, needs to be recognized as such only by its own art world.

Simple, don't you think? Yes and no. The problems come when you don't think, like me, that SL is a world.

3. SL as theatre

SL is a platform. When you enter it, everything you do is to set up your own performance. Choose an avatar. Edit it. Find a name, a costume, a position on the platform. Write down your script and act it. Add some furniture to the stage: everything you do is just a step forward in the development of your story. And of the collective history of SL. Your story can be similar to your (real) life, or radically different. Can be work, play or art. So, the SL "art world" is not real, it is just a collective myth, a narration, and in this sense it is very interesting. Most of the stories are boring, because most of the people are bad players. But some stories are very interesting. Think, for example, to Anshe Chung. Aimee Weber. James Wagner Au. Sugar Seville. China Tracy. Molotov Alva. Or Gazira Babeli. All beautiful stories. Not all of them are art, because not all of them want to be recognized as such. But if Anshe Chung will say. "my story of the first SL billionaire is art", she will be a better artist then DanCoyote Antonelli.

Like Anshe Chung, DanCoyote is adding furniture to the stage. But while Anshe Chung describes the Anshe Chung Studios as an entrepreneurial venture, Dancoyote describes his installations as art.

Indeed, Dancoyote seems to have understood it, maybe in a vague and faded way. His story is great. His young avatar; the myth of the sixth finger; Hyperformalism as the SL avantgarde: all these things are good entries in a good story. Probably what he does is not art, but Dancoyote Antonelli is, without doubt, the best artwork by DC Spensley. Also other artists, such as Adam Ramona and Juria Yoshikawa, wrote an interesting script for their avatars. Adam Ramona's avatar is wonderful. But all of them are confusing what their avatars are doing in SL with what their humans did in real life: they call it interactive installations, sound installations, optical art. And they neglect their script, which is exactly what gives sense to what they are doing, and what – I'd dare to say – can make their work interesting even for a real life audience which never experienced SL.

But most of the self-pretending SL artists make their own work without caring at all about their story. SL art is a midsummer night dream, that in a few years will turn into a nightmare, with people realizing that they wasted their time without creating anything valuable. Wake up, artists! Without narration there is no art in SL!

4. Performance, but not only

After what I wrote, probably you can understand why I think performance is the most interesting way to deal with SL. Gazira Babeli, Second Front, Man Michinaga, Eva and Franco Mattes are all feeding, with their works and acts, the mythologies of that cluster of stories that is called SL. They perform everywhere. They don't need technical settings to be experienced, because my imagination does not need technical settings. They play with the vernacular background of SL, and with their culture and tradition, not just with codes, prims and scripts. They don't add furniture to the stage, but stories to the script.

And, last but not least, they don't distinguish between "native art" and "RL art", because there is no such distinction: there's only art. That's why I count among the best examples of art related to virtual worlds such works as **Cao Fei**'s *RMB City* and **Scott Kildall and Victoria Scott**'s _No Matter_: they are not – not only – native, but they say something interesting on both the worlds their authors deal with – and they contribute to both the narratives.

"Rinascimento Virtuale Interview"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, September 17, 2008

Transcript of a video interview by Costanza Baldini (Festival della Creatività, Firenze) for **Rinascimento Virtuale**, the exhibition (curated by **Mario Gerosa** aka Frank Koolhas) that took place from October 21 to November 20, 2008 at the Museo di Storia Naturale in Firenze, Italy.

Rinascimento Virtuale. L'avatar è un'opera d'arte?

Domenico Quaranta. L'avatar può essere un'opera d'arte, come qualsiasi altra cosa del resto. Nella maggior parte dei casi, ovviamente, non lo è. Il mio avatar in SL, ad esempio, non è un'opera d'arte: è solo la maschera che io mi sono disegnato per interagire in un mondo sintetico. È un autoritratto, un dispositivo di socializzazione, un sistema di navigazione. Certo, ci ho messo della creatività per farlo, come del resto ne ho messa nel realizzare il mio biglietto da visita. Nessuno dei due è arte, anche se entrambi potrebbero diventarlo, in certe condizioni.

RV. Si metterebbe nel salotto un quadro realizzato in Second Life?

DQ. Lei si metterebbe in casa un quadro realizzato in Photoshop? Si e no, dipende dal quadro, non certo dal mezzo. In SL non si realizzano quadri: si importano realizzazioni esterne, si scattano fotografie, si realizzano installazioni che possono avere una valenza iconica.

RV. Quanto può valere un'opera realizzata in Second Life?

DQ. Ancora: 0, 1.000 o 1.000.000: dipende dall'opera, dall'interesse che suscita,

dal desiderio che riesce ad attivare.

RV. E' scoccata l'ora del Rinascimento virtuale?

DQ. Non credo. Su questo vorrei essere molto chiaro, a costo di sembrare un vecchio censore. Non esiste alcun movimento artistico nei mondi virtuali: esiste qualche buon artista che ha deciso di sperimentare con questo medium e una schiera di individui che hanno confuso con l'arte quello che fanno. È una cosa che succede spesso, e che può avere anche una sua funzione positiva, contribuendo ad allargare la nostra idea dell'arte. Quasi sempre nasce dalla confusione tra due termini: creatività e arte. La creatività viene usata in tante cose: allestire presepi, disegnare un libro o una rivista, progettare un marchio, gestire un'azienda, cucire un vestito. Nessuna di queste cose è "arte", anche se l'arte si può verificare in ciascuna di esse.

RV. Conviene investire nell'arte sviluppata nei social network?

DQ. Conviene investire nei buoni artisti. Compresi quelli che emergono dai social network.

RV. Quanto durerà la moda dell'arte di Second Life?

DQ. Non esiste una "moda dell'arte di Second Life". Esiste una nicchia operativa che si è costruita su uno strumento, e che ha scarsi riscontri fuori da questo contesto. La sua durata dipenderà dalla capacità dello strumento di innovarsi e stimolare la creatività delle persone, di estendere il proprio modello ad altri mondi virtuali; dalla capacità di questa nicchia di strutturarsi, di dotarsi di gerarchie e criteri di valutazione; dall'esistenza dei mondi virtuali, del tempo libero e della disoccupazione.

RV. Meglio i writers (i graffitari) o gli artisti dei social network?

DQ. Entrambi i termini sono fuori luogo. Keith Haring non è un writer né Gazira Babeli è un'artista dei social network, ma entrambi sono artisti di ottimo livello. Se devo scegliere tra le due cose intese come fenomeni culturali nel senso più ampio del termine, scelgo senza dubbio il writing come fenomeno di appropriazione illegale dello spazio pubblico: è spontaneo, illegale, ha una lunga tradizione, incide sulla realtà e non si ammanta della parola arte, anche se qualcuno cerca di applicargliela forzatamente.

RV. L'arte di Second Life è quella degli artisti affermati che si cimentano anche con questo strumento oppure è un'arte che nasce dal basso, un'arte da autodidatti?

DQ. La distinzione è artificiosa: l'arte può emergere ovunque, e anche se è più facile che un artista che si è già guadagnato credito altrove faccia un buon lavoro, non è affatto scontato. Ma è l'espressione "arte di SL" che mi lascia forti dubbi. Se devo per forza definire una nicchia operativa, preferisco ficcarci dentro i creativi naife piuttosto che i veri artisti, quale che sia il loro curriculum. Questi fanno arte senza aggettivi.

RV. Lei ha un'avatar in Second Life?

DQ. Si. Si chiama Domenico Quaranta, ha barba e capelli bianchi e porta un cappello a cilindro.

RV. Come definirebbe Second Life?

DQ. Una discarica dell'immaginario.

RV. Meglio mondo vero o mondo virtuale?

DQ. Preferisco il mondo vero per il clima, i mondi sintetici per la compagnia.

RV. Second Life è una bolla mediatica?

DQ. SL è il prodotto sofisticato di diverse linee evolutive delle tecnologie digitali. Ed è, sicuramente, un modello per il futuro. In essa vi è molto di interessante, ma raramente ha attratto i media. Diciamo che alcune aziende e individui, per un certo periodo, hanno cercato di sfruttare in chiave pubblicitaria l'interesse morboso che sembrava suscitare chi investiva denaro reale in un mondo sintetico. Oggi questo interesse si è spento, e gli spazi aperti da queste aziende sono tutti vuoti.

RV. Sa che sono stati girati dei film in Second Life? Gli avatar prenderanno il posto degli attori?

DQ. Solo quando riusciranno a rifare la scena dello specchio di Taxi Driver come e meglio di Robert de Niro.

RV. Matrix è il futuro o il presente?

DQ. Matrix è il passato. Ogni futuro immaginato somiglia al presente che l'ha generato, e Matrix è stato girato nel 1999 rielaborando un immaginario che risale agli anni Ottanta.

RV. Cosa pensa del virtuale?

DQ. Da cultore della Patafisica, preferisco il potenziale.

RV. Ci si può innamorare di un avatar?

DQ. Ci si può innamorare di qualsiasi cosa.

RV. Qual è l'espressione più avanzata dell'arte di questi anni?

DQ. Come sempre, è l'arte che parla di noi e del nostro presente con un linguaggio che sarà comprensibile anche agli uomini che ci seguiranno, nonostante i loro innesti tecnologici e i loro avatar.

RV. Cosa pensa della net art?

DQ. Penso che sia stata un grande momento dell'arte dell'ultimo decennio, e che non c'entri nulla con ciò di cui stiamo parlando.

RV. L'arte del futuro sarà quella dei grandi maestri o quella dei naif del web?

DQ. L'arte del futuro sarà quella degli artisti, dei critici e del pubblico del futuro. Potremmo fare tante previsioni, e sarebbero tutte sbagliate, perché il tutto dipende da come evolverà l'idea di arte. Ma francamente credo che i "naif del web", come li chiama lei, abbiano poche chance. Ma nulla esclude che il Warhol del XXI secolo ora stia scattando ritratti su SL. Dopotutto, quello del XX secolo disegnava pubblicità per le scarpe. Ma non è certo con quelle che è entrato nella storia.

RV. Fumetti, cinema di serie B, ritratti realizzati in Second Life: è vera arte?

DQ. L'arte è un fatto così magico e misterioso che a migliaia di anni dalla sua nascita siamo ancora qui a chiederci cosa sia arte e cosa non lo sia. Francamente, non credo che la mia sia la risposta definitiva al problema. Quello che posso fare è richiamare la sua attenzione su alcune convenzioni relative al termine arte: questo viene utilizzato di solito per designare le arti visive, ma anche (al plurale) per le altre arti (musica, architettura, cinema, etc.) e anche numerose tecniche. Tutto ciò conferisce al termine una grande complessità, che ne rende molto complicato l'utilizzo. Le faccio un esempio. Il cinema è un'arte (qualcuno l'ha definito la settima arte), ma non tutto il cinema è Arte (con la A maiuscola). Inoltre, quando diciamo, ad esempio, che Taxi Driver è Arte, non intendiamo dire che esso meriti un posto di rispetto nel mondo delle arti visive, ma nella storia del cinema come arte. Tuttavia, qualche film (ad esempio, Drawing Restraint 9 di Matthew Barney) è arte in entrambi i sensi, avendo cercato (e ottenuto) il riscontro di entrambe queste storie. Allo stesso modo, il fumetto è un'arte, ma pochi fumetti sono Arte, e solo alcuni di essi sono stati realizzati come opere d'arte nel senso conferito a questo termine dal mondo dell'arte contemporanea. Ma non le dirò mai che il Fumetto è Arte, e che un gallerista deve vendere i ritratti di SL perché sono Arte, anche se alcuni di essi lo sono.

"Alan Sondheim, the Accidental Artist"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, November 4, 2008

"In my world, there are no errors, only seductions!" Alan Sondheim

Both inside and outside the art world, there are artists who happen to be writers and writers who happen to be artists. Alan Sondheim would appear to belong in the latter category. For me, for a long time, he was the American professor who posted interesting yet cryptic essays on *Nettime* and other mailing lists. Then I discovered his code poetry, and then again his work in Poser, and his theories on digital identity started to take shape. It came as no surprise that he was one of the first to join the Second Life art community. At the opening of the ExhibitA Gallery in Odyssey, next to Gazira Babeli's legendary *Avatar on Canvas*, he showed a surprising video featuring the hypnotic dancing of a group of deformed avatars. In his essay on Gaz's work he wrote:

> "[My work] is concerned with inconceivable positionings of one's own avatar, positionings within which behaviors pile on behaviors, creating 'behavior collisions' that create, for the viewer (distinct from the performer) a disturbing and/or dis/eased representation of the body, an abject body that indicates something else other than normative is occurring, something that can't be absorbed. With Gaz, this occurs first-person - the change is to 'me' and my image/imaginary; with my work, it is third-person and in a sense stains or transforms the mise en scene into something abject and unexpected." [1]

I commissioned this text some months ago, upon Gaz's suggestion, for a book I was editing. Translating it into Italian was hard, but also a wonderful experience.

Doing it, I encountered a writer who uses language in the same way that the artist Alan Sondheim uses textures, codes, scripts, physical laws to bring his ambitious, disturbing, absorbing and overwhelming *Gesamtkunstwerk* to life. And what are textures, codes, scripts and physical laws, if not language? Language and body: these are the pillars of Alan Sondheim's work. Both are concerned with the issue of identity, but not in an obvious, prosaic way. Both language and the body are the result of a mish-mash of human and machinic, natural and artificial:

> "In SL your bodies intended, there's nothing given but the slate. [...] it's the projections that fundamentally characterize it - introjections from SL body to organism, projections from organism to SL body." [2]

Identity. Since the dawn of the internet, it has been a given that a homepage is a projection of oneself on the net. Sondheim's website [3] doesn't even have a homepage: it is just an index page with an alphabetical list of files. There are no folders or any other devices to help you make sense of it all. Txt files, html files, images, videos, mp3s, essays, personal data: everything is on the same level. Take all this stuff, put it in a shaker, mix it with whatever you can find in a digital landfill such as Second Life (scripts, porn images, prims, active objects, textures etc.), and lastly distribute it upon three levels (underground, ground-floor and sky-sphere) - and you get *The Accidental Artist*. [4]

> "The human figure's place in art gets turned inside out here in this world of unfolded and refolded geometries. What remains of the body in the domain of the virtual? What survives the transition? Could this still be called a body? Where are we going in this crossing over into bits, why are we going there/nowhere and what does it say about the nature of human desire? At what point does a beautiful accident become a tragic mistake? Is there truly such a thing as a mistake?" [5]

The Accidental Artist is a body turned into an environment [6], which abuses both users - kicking them around, throwing them up into the sky or down to hell, and,

by virtue of its very existence, challenging those of users - and the place it is built in, bypassing all the rules of SL. In a text, Sondheim enlists his "not inconsiderable" sins in SL: "I have overburdened the servers with far too many video and image textures. / I have added too many prim scripts to too many objects. / I have required far too complex screen redrawings time and time again. / I have taken apart the building where the exhibition is held...", he writes. We could say that *The Accidental Artist* is the aesthetic of sin and disobedience. If paradise is a masterpiece of simplicity, complexity is evil; thus Sondheim is a sinner, and his installation is too. He doesn't like things simple, and even if he gave visitors two pages of recommendations on how to get the best out of his installation, he knows they would never understand its complexity. There is no linear way to describe or explain *The Accidental Artist*. Sondheim knows it, and that is why he created it, instead of writing an essay. In a way, *The Accidental Artist* is a visual essay. In his list of sins he confesses: "I have overlaid the whole with far too much theory. / I have thought too much and have left little space for spontaneous creation with the exception of the tunings and retunings that constantly occur." This is true, but not entirely. When you enter *The Accidental Artist* you are overwhelmed by the range of possibilities it opens up, and contents and theories it displays. Sure, you can't isolate them, UNDERSTAND them: but you SEE them in a glance, or better still, you EXPERIENCE them, and that is awesome.

At the same time, *The Accidental Artist* is a body of work that, while it occurs, while it is being experienced in different conditions by different users, generates other works, and other considerations. Sondheim is the first user of his own creation. The various series of videos and images he has put on his website are the best proof of this. *Falling Sky*, made in the skysphere with the sky set to midnight, is abstract, flashing, absorbing. *Sexed*, focused on the body, is fleshy, bloody and repulsive.

In their end works very few artists manage to hide the creative process and render it as perfect and finite as a diamond. In SL, Babeli is one of them. Her works are classic, simple, easy to experience, and do not need settings. Most artists fail in the search for simplicity. Sondheim points to a completely different target: he doesn't

make the diamond, but gives us the furnace. He doesn't point to a final work, but explores and exposes the process. Try it. Looking into the fire can be a great experience, no different from looking into a diamond.

Notes

1. Alan Sondheim, "I met my Baby, Out Behind the Gaz-Works", in Domenico Quaranta (ed.), *Gazira Babeli*, Brescia: Fabio Paris Editions, 2008, p.81.

2. *Ibid*, p. 79.

3. See Alan Sondheim's website : www.alansondheim.org.

4. To access the Odyssey exhibition *The Accidental Artist*, sign up on Second Life and go to slurl.com/secondlife/Odyssey/48/12/22.

5. From *The Accidental Artist*'s notecard.

6. Alan Sondheim's first avatar, Alan Dojoji, actually is a body turned into an environment. She is a kind of nebula, a luminescent agglomerate of abstract and human shapes and other particles that move and fade in the sky. His second avatar, Julu Twine, has a female shape, with a real penis between her legs, and usually performs slow, enigmatic dances that turn her body into a spineless puppet.

"Hammering the Void"
In Spawn of the Surreal, June 1, 2009

Text written for **Gazira Babeli**'s first solo exhibition at <u>DAM Gallery</u>, Berlin (May 30 – July 31, 2009).

"The world we actually have does not meet my standards." Philip K. Dick

In 1920, at the opening of a Dada exhibition in Köln, Max Ernst made an axe available for the audience. As far as I know, this gesture was never reenacted. That's a shame. An artwork should always come with an axe in attach. This would remind us that art must be loved, or hated. That it deserves more than an idiot gaze. Duchamp took years to make us accept his urinal, yet he's still unable to persuade us to use it in the more logical way: pissing into it. I bet he would be happy with this kind of interaction: turning an artwork into an urinal.

Gazira Babeli never reenacts – she acts. She's worshipped as a marabout, but she hates spells and she does her best to break them. Tell her "aura" and she'll throw an hail of meteoroids onto you. Tell her "virtual" and she'll shoot you into the air at 900 km/h. When, in 2006, she made Come To Heaven, she released the code of the performance through her website: she discovered the painful delights of being beaten up by a computer graphics card, and she wanted to share this feeling with everybody. Yet, even on a computer screen, people keep on loving the moonlight instead of killing it, and being charmed by everything is introduced to them as "art". Thus Gazira created the fourteen sisters. They are called Anger Erin, Envy Sixpence, Gluttony Aboma, Greed Petrovic, Lust Placebo, Pride Placebo, Sloth Swansong, Courage Sparta, Faith Radikal, Hope Varnish, Justice Kimono, Love Brandi, Prudence Miami, Temperance Navarita. They are Gazira Babeli, fourteen times.

Carrying a wooden sledge-hammer, they move all together, and hit violently. When you, beloved art lover, meet them, feel free to think at the following references, at your pleasure: La Liberté guidant le peuple, The Night Watch, Il quarto stato, an army of models performing Vanessa Beecroft. At your first blow on the head, art will be replaced, in your mind, by Castor oil and gas chambers.

This platoon in Wellington boots and suspender belt comes without any notice, and intervenes in social events – mostly exhibition openings – making a hell of a mess. Is this the usual, boring self-referential crap we are used to finding in art? What Gazira likes is to intervene in the rituality of the real, and break up its continuity. The world she actually has does not meet her standards, and she hammers it. She works in this direction from the very beginning: just think to her earthquakes, her showers of pop bananas, her Campbell's Soup cans, her pizzas fouling up the gallery with tomato soup. Isn't she an arse-hole? If you need, Gazira's hammers are there for you. Use them, against her too. That's what she wants.

Postscript

When they are not swooping down on some crowd trying to smash an artist's head, Gazira's Furies are imprisoned in a claustrophobic office with a view on Windows' standard desktop, jumping around all the time. The office is encaged in a computer. The computer is encaged in a gallery. Gaz' en valise, finally. It looks like a storm in a glass snowball, until you don't open it. And it comes with an hammer, of course.

"Farewell, Spawn of the Surreal!"
In *Spawn of the Surreal*, September 9, 2009

During the summer, I finally decided to put some order in my web activity. I bought a new domain and started uploading there all my stuff. So, the moment came to take a decision about *Spawn of the Surreal* as well. I started the blog about two years ago, in July 2007. At the time, I was intrigued by the possibilities of art in virtual worlds, and maintaining a blog was a good way to keep the grasp and go on researching on the subject even when my work was bringing me in other directions. I posted on it quite regularly for about five months. It was a wonderful experience, I learned a lot and I met great people.

In 2008, my work as a curator became more and more absorbing. Also my interest in virtual worlds started becoming a source for new works and projects. I had no time for blogging, and I started posting articles published somewhere else, press releases of my upcoming projects, etc. It took me another year to realize that the *Spawn of the Surreal* adventure was over. Of course, I'm still interested in the things I discussed here, I'm still writing on them and organizing events in or about virtual worlds. What I don't need anymore is a separate channel for them.

That's it. If you want, check out **domenicoquaranta.com**: me and my avatar - *pardon*, me, and my human - will go on posting there. *Spawn of the Surreal* will have a second life there, probably in the tag cloud. This website won't move from here, but won't be updated any more. Just in case, **a clone is archived here** – Google played hard with me this year, and this is one of the reasons that made me migrate to Wordpress.

See you,

Domenico Quaranta