The Translation of Art in Virtual Worlds

By Patrick Lichty

INTRODUCTION

Within the past decade, virtual worlds have emerged as a prominent factor in technological culture. Virtual economies like *Everquest* have grown to rival gross domestic products of small nations (1), Chinese "gold farming" (the practice of harvesting treasure in online roleplaying games using cheap labor and reselling to the West) is big business, and record numbers of users are participating in online games and environments. Another aspect of emergent technoculture is the formation of virtual artists' communities in corresponding online worlds including *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and *Second Life* (SL). These works include virtual galleries of translated 2D works into 3D galleries, Machinima (video works created from the capture of live action in virtual worlds), performance, and interactive in-world works. From these multivalent practices and modes of representation there arise questions of difference, context, audience, and engagement. In this examination of New Media art practices in virtual worlds, and the online virtual environment *Second Life* in particular, I will examine the aforementioned issues, and consider the context and translation of these works from the tangible to the virtual, the "mixed/cybrid", and the formal work of virtual art to discern its function between modes of existence, and its location within culture.

Before continuing this discussion, I would like to define the scope of this discussion more closely. For example, the word "Virtual" alludes to nearly anything operating through computer digital mediation, including networks, cellular nets, the Internet, or in virtual environments. For this discussion, I want to limit the discussion to real-time 3D platforms, including multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like *WoW* and Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVEs) like *There* and *Second Life*. Even this level of specificity can leave a problematically large set of examples, and for that reason, this study will focus on the practices in the online virtual world, *Second Life*. While this focus may elide some aspects of the social functions of 3D online environments such as the differences between multiplayer online gaming and non goal-oriented world platforms the issues of form, audience, and engagement remain consistent. It is through this examination of these specific effects of art in virtual worlds that, as Grau states, an analysis can be made in terms of comparison to history, but in relation to it as well as contemporary practice in terms of phenomenology, aesthetics and origination (2).

ASPECTS OF PRAXIS

Four aspects of artistic praxis in virtual worlds that I wish to discuss relate to the representational modality and the permeability of the boundary between worlds, the associated problems of audience, context of the virtual or transmediated, and questions of form. Modality refers to the location and vector direction of the work's relation between worlds, such as importing physical work into *Second Life*, or the realization of *SL*-

based works in the physical (directly or via interpretation). Audiences for virtual work are often small, as servers can only manage limited numbers of avatars (usually 50-75 per region), and presuppose certain educational and technical resources, as well as one's familiarity with online/cyberculture. From this, it can be said that context is as cultural as technical, as virtual worlds often have their own specific cultures, and art created for one milieu may not translate well to another. And lastly, (this may be an essay in itself,) is there a virtual formalism in online worlds? Before looking at artists' works in *SL*, I want to discuss these four attributes (modality, audience, context, and formalism,) then consider series of artists works that fall under this framework.

In considering representational modality in virtual world-based art, the nature of communication of the work is dependent upon its location and vector. What I mean by vector is a gesture of direction, simultaneity, concurrence, or stasis in regards to its movement between worlds. For example, execution of a virtual project exhibits a gesture defined by its formal, cultural, and conceptual context. Is it a purely virtual installation, meant to be experienced from inside the world only, akin to Char Davies' early VR work *Ephemere* (3)? What is meant by this is that in *Ephemere*, users donned traditional glove-and-goggles for VR, and navigated using a vest that controlled their movement by sensing their breathing and translating that to buoyancy in the virtual world. Aside from the simulated world, are there different levels of representation of work outside of the online experience, either as edited media, or realized virtual structures in physical form? Or, is the work in question basically 2-dimensional work translated into a virtual construct? This epistemological "movement" within and between worlds has four basic structures; work that is essentially traditional physical art translated to the virtual, "evergent" work that is physically realized from virtual origins, the virtual itself, designed entirely for the client/browser experience, and "cybrids" that exist concurrently between various modalities.

The semiotics of the reiteration of tangible works in virtual space is a straightforward affair, as is the work that is meant to be experienced entirely in-world. However, the movement from virtual to the tangible, which includes consideration of works existing with simultaneous physical and virtual components, present more complex models. Marcos Novak has used the term "evergence" (4) to refer to the physicalization of structures that have their origin in the virtual. While evergent technologies and artworks have been realized through haptic devices and sensor arrays, other technologies like rapid prototyping and computerized fabrication are more direct examples of processes that could illustrate properties of evergence. However, the idea of evergence only addresses the "original" work of virtual art whose vector everges it into the physical, but does not account for simultaneous modes of representation, which is the subject of the cybrid.

Peter Anders, in his book, *Envisioning Cyberspace* (5), explored the idea of the "Cybrid" environment existing simultaneously in virtual and physical modes. Examples of the cybrid are Augmented Reality, Physical Computing, and Telepresence. In Second Life, cybridity is metaphorical or limited, as it utilizes only the screen, keyboard and mouse physical interfaces and does not significantly integrate the physical environment as part of the interface to the virtual. There are works that clearly illustrate the cybrid, a notable example being Perry Hoberman's *Systems Maintenance* (6) in which the room layout is reiterated in virtual, miniature, and full-scale forms. The interactor is challenged to consider the (in)consistencies between worlds by aligning, composing, or resolving these juxtapositions. Contrasted with Hoberman, Second Life is far more "virtual", although artists in this discussion attempt to problematize this Platonic duality. In addition, an interesting metaphor in relation to the cybrid is Linden Labs' (the maker of *Second Life*) is that of the name of their environment itself as existential overlay to the physical. Linden labs invocation of this metaphor raises questions about the intent of the creation of such worlds and how (or if) artists will choose to engage

with virtual environments in this manner. Virtual/physical concurrence can be passive/multimodal (*Second Front*) or direct (Proske, Haque, et al), and represent a developing arena for mixed mode virtual works. But then, modality is closely related to the question of form, and is the next issue under consideration.

How an artist communicates with a medium (context, mode) is also relative to what the artist says (form, content). The artists in this essay fulfill the content portion, and the previous two are discussed in this first half of the essay, which leaves us with form. The problem of formalism inevitably brings me to the criticism of Clement Greenberg and David Antin. Greenberg, in essays such as "The New Sculpture" and "American-Type Painting" (7) among others where he developed the aesthetics of high Modernist formalism that stressed the essence of the medium, foregrounding artists such as Rothko and Judd. In doing so, Greenberg solidifies the link between the "medium and the message", paralleling other thinkers such as McLuhan.

The problem with the invocation of Greenberg stems from his foundations in material formalism taken in context with the formalism of virtual worlds, where there is only a simulation of formalism. However, one could say that there is formalism in code, or in 3D clients like *Second Life* as defined by their methods of representation, such as through 3D hardware/graphics cards and software drivers (OpenGL), as well as the tools themselves. The methods of modeling, texturing of objects and virtual projection define a formalism for virtual worlds, if one can remap from Modernism to Postmodernism by substituting the object for the Baudrillardian simulacrum. Verisimilitude of form is what becomes essential in virtual worlds, and subsequent layers/protocols, such as the client, code, and constructors.

While Greenberg gives some of the answers to my discussion of virtual formalism, David Antin offers the added dimension of distinctiveness. In *Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium*. (8), Antin defines the formal qualities of video as being distinct from TV in that it is created bottom up, rather than hegemonically/institutionally (top-down). This could be the distinction of open environments like SL versus video games like *WoW*, in that in games, most of the objects are *mostly* defined, or are at least not as easily modified. The perceived problem may be that the *Second Life* software is made by a corporation, the art-structures created by the users, much like the Portapak "portable" video recorder being created by Sony. However, in *WoW*, *Everquest*, *Eve Online*, et al, the universe, characters, modalities are much more tightly defined, and so create a much tighter context for expression/communication.

Also related to audience engagement through works in virtual worlds is the cultural context of the milieu, as virtual worlds have specific cultures. This is likely proportional to the degree of user involvement and community coherence. Evidence of culturally specific terms in Second Life is illustrated by words like "griefing" (social disruption), "Ruthing" (the fact that all avatars teleport initially as females, or 'Ruths'), and "Goreans" (the community of slavers that roleplay using John Norman's *Gor* pulp fantasy book series). Specific terms also exist for worlds like *WoW*, and these linguistic traces illustrate the cultural peculiarities of online worlds, but this is not limited to the virtual. For example, there are numerous semiotic differences from culture to culture, such as the hand gesture for "OK" in the West possible being interpreted for money ("okane") in Japanese culture, and likewise the signification of white as representing purity or death. Therefore, the virtual artist has tremendous communication challenges, not only in regards to the ones pertaining to bridging misperceptions between Contemporary and New Media art cultures, but also the particular online milieu in which the artist is working as well.

This is evident in a 2007 ban on what is termed as "ageplay", or depiction of child avatars in what might be considered erotic or sexual situations. The issue, as reported by numerous agencies, including Reuters' Second Life office (9) is that the ability to modify avatars, or virtual bodies, into childlike forms has resulted in "childplay", or simulated sexual acts with these "child" avatars. The sim-sex practice created controversy in The Netherlands, Italy, et al in which child pornography laws are far more stringent than in the United States, and was banned by Linden Labs in 2007. This writer does not contest the illegality of child pornography, but what is more interesting is a strange parallel to American controversy in child nudity in the arts.

In 2007, artist Zoe Hartnell (nee, physical identity unknown), along with partner Sysperia Poppy, created artworks for their *The King Has Fallen* gallery. These works, now mostly offline due to in-world controversy (10), depicted Hartnell's dolls in Victorian "Gothic Lolita" style, a fashion style popular in 2000's Japan, and various erotic configurations. Hartnell's works strongly echo Hans Bellmer's "La Poupee" (11) in their manipulation of anatomically correct dolls, as well as commonly available Japanese doll makes. In August 2007, Hartnell & Poppy's *The King has Fallen* gallery was taken offline by the artists due to community controversy regarding their work and its relation to the childplay ban instituted by Linden Labs. While this sort of controversy has its precedents in the representation of child-forms, such as the 1989 Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Cincinnati CAC (12), the general ban on erotic depictions of childlike avatars shows the challenges the artist faces in terms of representational practice and cultural context in a given environment.

Another issue specific to the creation to work in virtual worlds is that of audience. Engagement of the audience can be problematic, as there are technical limitations of server technology. An example is that a region in *SL* has a maximum avatar capacity of 100 concurrent users, and most areas begin to fail at less than eighty visitors at a time due to server and network workloads. The *Second Life* client, as well as most MMORPG games requires a high-performance computer system. These two requirements limit the actual audience in terms of actual number of people who can experience a work at one time, as well as establishing socioeconomic barriers for the patron. This is due to the relatively high system and network connection requirements and technical proficiencies including figuring out different interface paradigms, learning 3D modeling tools, and elementary scripting, creating assumptions of privilege in these worlds. From this, universal access to virtual work cannot be assumed to be viable, or possibly even desirable for some populations, but questions remain as to the sociocultural impact of art residing in virtual worlds.

The social effects of representational practices in virtual worlds and how they reach audiences are extremely mixed, and their reactions are unpredictable. The incident of the "nuclear bomb" on the Australian ABC island (13) drew widespread attention more as a novelty than imminent threat. Called "griefing", this form of in-world aggravation seldom results in more than bemused news stories or in extreme cases, restoration of an SL region to a previous state. Although griefing is probably the most extreme case of an in-world agitprop practice, interventions or art would not gain much attention except for the efforts of external media - bloggers, interventionists' sites and the occasional news organization. It is truly the case of the virtual work of art, except in few cases, it is the metaphorical case of the tree falling in the woods needing a witness to experience the sound of its toppling.

INTERMEZZO: FROM PATAPHYSICS TO PRAXIS

In the preceding, I have discussed some of the concerns that I have experienced in the creation of art in

virtual worlds as an artist and critic. Form, audience, context and modality frame many of the issues of praxis intrinsic to the creation of work in these spaces. The following is an explication of artists' practices in Second Life that illustrate different configurations of the four qualities that I have discussed. In addition, the reader may notice the direction of the vector that my narrative takes from the "imported" physical work to the evergent/cybrid, to the wholly virtual. It is through this movement from the largely physical to the wholly virtual that I hope to create an epistemic continuum from which we may derive some understanding of the different ways artists engage with virtual worlds.

REPRESENTATIONAL VECTORS IN VIRTUAL ART

I: THE PROBLEM OF TRANSMEDIATION

According to the definition in Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, the word transliteration is defined as:

The act or product of transliterating, or of expressing words of a language by means of the characters of another alphabet. (14)

Considering this, one of the first steps artists take in integrating their work into virtual worlds is the practice of transmediation, or the translation between environments/milieus, i.e. physical work into virtual spaces. This, paraphrased from the Second Life Community Conference presentation by MacArthur Foundation Director for Digital Media, Learning and Education Connie Yowell, is the recreation of the physical in the virtual, and a method of orienting oneself in unfamiliar terrain. This, says Yowell, is the first step in the engagement with virtual worlds, as transmediation of the physical is a gesture of recreating the familiar in alien milieus in order to orient oneself in terms of space, identity, community, and as I will discuss later, culture and history. In many ways, transmediation of traditional media (2D art) into the virtual reminds me of the incongruities between contexts as previously mentioned in Hoberman's *Systems Maintenance*. Using this piece as a metaphor we can see that the transmediator tries to align the tangible and the virtual, but then the cybrid and virtual formalists are less concerned with continuity, but are interested in the differences and distinctions between worlds and scales.

It is problematic to not appear critical of artists re-presenting print, painting, and photography, but a conversation with Factory artist Bibbe Hansen in her *SL* gallery built with son Channing encapsulated the issues of remediation clearly. For her, making virtual galleries were "difficult", for a number of reasons, including presence and issues of scale on different screen sizes. These issues necessitate formal adjustments of the work to compensate for perception via client-based experience, such as ensuring different sizing of work, different placement to ensure proper viewing angles and avatar ergonomics. But conversely, community and real-time social interaction through avatar embodiment-by-proxy within the virtual gallery do make it more than merely a 3D website. However, other issues come into play, including attendance, synchronic time -- which are issues for all 3D installations and vibrant sites for conversation that fall outside the scope of this one.

TRANSMEDIATION AND THE COLLISION OF CULTURES

In addition to the challenges of translation of embodiment and representation between mediums, there are

the challenges to a heterogeny of cultures in online worlds and their respective aesthetics. Wrapped inside the integral role that commerce plays in *Second Life*, it is no surprise that commercialism and high culture would clash. Clement Greenberg, in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (15), problematizes the avant-garde's disconnection with patronage, and the rise of mass production commodity culture. Combined with the rise of a mass digital imaging/video culture through inexpensive tools and distribution networks, two social strata appear.

First, the ubiquity of commerce fosters the creation of a commodity décor art economy, which Greenberg says, "…demands nothing of its customers except money-not even their time." Greenberg also posits the commodity art scene as not entirely devoid of content, but being more akin to a folk art than the high arts of the Western tradition that were supported by patronage before the rise of the 20th Century avant-garde. The linkage of a populist art to capitalism is a logical association in *Second Life* culture, and bears cultural similarities to Greenberg's analogy to avant-garde disconnection from capital, and the commercial & décor art market belonging to mass culture.

This cultural stratification was evident at the Second Life Community Conference in which the event's Art Expo featured artists from the online community. In line with Greenberg's expectations of kitsch's *appearance* of culture, the exhibitors had exhibited abstract art that either drew heavy influences from popular fin de siecle artists like Kandinsky and Matisse, or abstract cyberart similar to that of the mid-90's. The numerous online shops in Second Life that offer virtual décor art for virtual homes, reflecting the multi-billion dollar tangible décor market, mirror this. The issue is that in the early days of mass virtual cultures, contexts and audiences are emerging seems to reflect the tangible. As with the tangible world, the issue of art and reproduction tends to center on the function of the work, which includes issues of intent, content, context and audience; an analogy being Maxfield Parrish vs. Titian, or even Kinkaide vs. Bierstadt.

II: THE PROBLEM CHILDREN: REMEDIATION/REITERATION

While transmediation of works into virtual worlds seem to center their issues around problems of representation and culture, as well as commerce's convergence with culture in the case of SL, the next shift towards the virtual deals with the representation of performance-based works in virtual worlds. A key work that informs this strategy is Marina Abramovic's 2005 Guggenheim work, *Seven Easy Pieces* (16), in which she recreated seven performance art works in new contexts. Many of these works, the most striking of which was Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, both reiterate and recontextualize the texts. This set of performances, stated Abramovic, was in part intended to refresh the history of performance art by recreating these experiences through embodied experience. The issue that Abramovic foregrounds in the recreation of these works is the relation of context to the subtlety of meaning in performance. In the case of Acconci's work, the onanistic element of *Seedbed* is fundamentally reformulated by the change in gender. In this way, Abramovic, through this work and the six others, question the specificity of the pieces' context in terms of time, place, and embodiment. But then one may ask, does the covering of the work preserve the meaning of a performance in a different context by remediating from the tangible to the virtual?

The term remediated, or synthetic, performance is used by artists such as Scott Kildall and Eva/Franco Mattes (17) to describe practices that recreate works in performance art in virtually "embodied" media. With both artists, the recreation/remediation of performance artworks serves two purposes. It subverts the visceral immediacy that performance art creates by centering the work on the site of the body. But conversely, these remediation artists playfully ask the question of affect in virtual performance through the viewer's connection

to the avatar. This tension between subverting the immediacy of the body, but invoking our identification with the virtual doppelganger illustrates the difficulty in being in the liminal space of being present in two worlds.

In Kildall's *Paradise Ahead*, he recreates twelve performance pieces, exploiting the virtual "zone of ambiguity"(18) that the simulated world presents while referencing the familiarity of the body and iconic art performances. In this series, Kildall recreates works by Abramovic (*Rest Energy*), Burden (*Shoot*, Ono (*Cut Piece*), Klein (*Leap Into the Void*), Tan (*Lift*), and others that center discourse at the vicarious site of the body, but that threat becomes ironic through the virtualization of the site in question. For example, Burden's *Shoot* becomes a referent to the familiar work, but also resembles a first person shooter mise en scene. Through this confrontation with the (virtual) body, Kildall leaves us torn between Dionysian visceral engagement of danger, abandon, flight, pain, and epiphany and the Apollonian rationalization of the throwaway avatar. Each work hovers in the space between oblivion and the eternally respawnable in the uncomfortable space between the virtual "toy" body and flesh and blood.

On the other hand, the Mattes' *Thirteen Most Beautiful Avatars* (19) references Warhol's series of film portraiture from 1964 to 1965, including *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, *Fifty Fantastics*, and *50 Personalities*. In *Avatars*, the Mattes create close-ups of avatars from Second Life, including prominent community members Lanai Jarrico and Aimee Weber. Where Warhol created rather abject, mugshot-like vignettes of his subjects, each avatar portrait is coquettish and dramatic, illustrating the techno-utopian dream of eternal youth and beauty, and the YouTube promise of everyone having their 15,000 website hits of fame. They key irony is that with the ideal of fame and beauty in Second Life, which is an astute read by the artists. When a community that has generated as much media attention as that of Second Life, and where anyone is as beautiful as their patience to shop for accoutrements and pocketbooks allow, who are the famous? But more importantly, in the land where everyone is potentially beautiful, who are the *most* beautiful?

Another wonderfully ironic piece is the Mattes' remediation of Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks* (20), originally sponsored by New York City's Dia Foundation as a project launched in 1982 at Documenta 7. Designed as a mission to effect social and environmental change, *7000 Oaks* took five years to complete, with seven thousand trees with corresponding columnar basalt stones, the last of which were planted at Documenta 8 in 1987. The Mattes' remediation, created in Second Life on the 25th anniversary of the 1982 inauguration, and with locations in at least two regions, claims, in reiteration of the Dia documentation of the Beuys work states the SL-based install as "part of a global mission to effect environmental and social change"(21), remediating the Dia text of the piece. The "stones" are evident throughout the virtual world, which obviously has either participatory effects, fostered awareness of the original's intent, or both. However, the remediation of Beuys' work in the virtual is problematized by Julian Bleecker's missive, *When 1st Life Meets 2nd Life: The 1685 Pound Avatar and the 99 Ton Acre* (22), in which he does some cursory calculations and posits that an avatar emits the same amount of CO_2 than driving an SUV 1293 miles, or an acre emitting 99 tons of greenhouse gases? Perhaps this is the logical function of placing *7000 Oaks* in *Second Life*, but it also illustrates the difficulties of reconciling the vector of recontextualizing conceptual works from the tangible into the virtual, both in terms of pragmatism and performativity.

III: THE EVERGENTS: EXTRUDING PHYSICALITY FROM THE VIRTUAL

For our discussion, we have been describing gestures and translations between the virtual and the tangible worlds. In the case of the transmediated work, conventional/traditional artwork is directly translated into the

virtual, with little formal modification. As mentioned, there is little augmentation to the work, and in many cases, the work either meets challenges of the necessity for re-presentation in virtual worlds due to altered issues of perspective and scale. Or, the transmediated work is reduced to Greenbergian commodity kitsch or a form of digital folk/populist art. In our next study, the remediators have faced the challenges of recontextualization of performative works and the contradictions and tensions they create between the body and the avatar. The first represents a direct translation from the tangible to the virtual, and the second represents a vector pointing to the virtual from the tangible. The next logical point of departure is the inversion of the remediation vector, or the gesture from the virtual to the tangible, or the gesture of evergence, or the emergence into the physical from the virtual where no physical referent had previously existed.

A pop culture reference that illustrates the concept is that of the emergence of the character Flynn from the computer world from the movie, *TRON* (23). The one flaw in this argument is that Flynn had been digitized into the ENTCOM mainframe, and a better metaphor is that if the anthropomorphic program-construct TRON himself had materialized into the physical. From a metaphorical perspective, there are a number of artists who have practices that center around constructed identities which have are re-presented in the physical, like Mariko Mori's *Pop Idol* action figure edition for Parkett. But, since this discussion deals specifically with representational practices in virtual worlds, a prime example would be the development of work of media doyenne Lynn Hershman-Leeson.

For years, Hershmann has explored the practice of constructed, mediated, and manipulated identities, a seminal work being her series of Roberta Breitmore works of the 1970's. in these works, Roberta is described as a constructed person interacting with real people in real time. For four years, Hershman-Leeson "performed" Roberta's life in various contexts in San Francisco, documenting her "life" in installation, photography, and other media. For *Life to the Second Power* (24), Hershman created a mixed reality archive based in part on her 1972 *Dante Hotel* in Second Life. Her various fictive personae, including Breitmore, reborn as Roberta Ware, join software constructs DiNA and Agent Ruby in the Life Squared archive in *NeWare Island* maintained by Stanford University. What is more interesting is Hershaman-Leeson's evergence of the virtual Roberta with the rapid prototyping company Fabjectory as an extension of her metaphor of realizing the conceptual Roberta in the streets of San Francisco. However, the Roberta (Ware) which is the denizen of the *Life to the Second Power* installation, which now exists as a miniature statue, is perhaps the "real" Roberta Ware, as opposed to the "dramatization" of Roberta Breitmore. The Stanford project is a logical extension of Hershman-Leeson's work in mediated identity, and brings is to the wholly virtual. That is, the artists in Second Life whose virtual work makes no pretension of a referent to the tangible.

IV: THE SIMULACRUM AS ROOT NODE: SECOND LIFE BASED WORKS

In *Simulations and Simulacra* (25) Jean Baudrillard wrote of simulated culture, or one that exists without a referent to the real, but expresses itself in terms superseding the real. As an aside, while it might be possible to create works that exist in the virtual that do not express themselves in terms of references to the tangible, they are likely extremely subtle or outside the embodied paradigm of human experience. The previous example of Breitmore/Ware is problematic in that one could argue that Breitmore is a hybrid identity, and that Ware is a cybrid, existing in multiple worlds. While this may be true, the function of using Ware as exemplar is that of the Gibsonian extrusion of the virtual into the tangible (26), my categorization of works may define cultural "functions" of key aspects of the artists' installations than the whole of a given piece. Therefore, for the discussion of art that acts as simulacra of craft and proxies of identity, tangible referents here are seen

as merely representative or "theatres" for the simulacrum. This is most definitely the case of Cao Fei's *iMirror* installation at the 2007 Venice Bienniale.

iMirror(26) is a three-part documentary about her time as an anime character "cosplayer" (person who dresses in genre costumes, such as fetish, anime, et al) in *Second Life*. This continues the ongoing dialogue about mediated identity including artists like Hershman-Leeson, but much more specifically the impact of Asian pop media. This international conversation includes work by Huyghe et al (*No Ghost, Just a Shell*), Mori (*Idol Singer*), Murakami (*Hiropon*, *Little Boy exhibition*), and questions the relationship in defining cultural identity. Fei takes this one step further by extrapolating this obfuscation of abstracted identity by representing a virtual anime character flaneur piloted by a Chinese woman in a rapidly changing world who navigates through a wholly mediated milieu.

In *iMirror*, Fei represents three aspects of SL, the commercial/popular perspective, the affective/narrative (through her virtual love story), and a series of avatar portraits to describe it as a place, another of being, and as a community. The Venice Biennale installation consisted of a dome-like structure in which the various components of the *iMirror*, documentary, parts of which are mirrored in Second Life, neither of which are extant at the time of this writing. According to critic Domenico Quaranta, he loves the work as it represents the melancholic quality of online worlds and gives the viewer a real flavor of virtual existence (27). But on the other hand, Quaranta also states that the more "genuine" Fei tries to make the work, the more distortions between realities emerge, making both "theatres" in the (in)tangible problematic. However, it is this problematic nature that reifies *iMirror*, like *No Ghost, Just a Shell*, as a purely virtual work that is difficult to frame.

The last of the "purely virtual" artists under consider here is the Italian avatar artist, Gazira Babeli (28). Gazira, which is another word for a sort of transient, admits to no physical existence, except vague admissions to being a "pirate signal" beamed out of Milan. This is where Babeli meshes her practice with other New Media "code artists" like Mez Breeze. Gazira is like the Wintermute/Neuromancer AI who interacts ironically with her native platform; observing, injecting noise (*Grey Goo*), suffering temptation (*Gaz of the Desert, after Bunuel*). The traces of her existence as *Second Life* scripts, text, and video are on her site, but little of her seems to everge into the tangible, except for web traces. The rest of her interventions are wholly online, with persistent installations of attacking Warhol soup cans, singing pizzas, and collapsing monoliths on Locusolus Island. Gazira is probably one of the most frustrating artists for her opacity between worlds (more so even than Hershman-Leeson/Breitmore), but also one of the more entertaining, as "Gaz" is a fractious autonomous spirit who threatens to everge from the virtual, but is a winking signifier of chaos in an otherwise highly ordered world.

IV: THE CYBRIDS: CONCURRENT PRACTICES AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

The last representational strategy yet to cover is that where artists occupy several spaces at the same time. The closest so far may be Hershman-Leeson and Cao Fei, but in their respective bodies of work the "center of gravity," or focus, is firmly in the tangible or the virtual. In the case of the cybrid artist, there is the gesture of concurrence, that is, praxis that is designed to operate simultaneously in the virtual (in-world), online (Internet-based), and tangible spaces. The formal issues for simultaneous representation in mixed worlds are similar to those such as those encountered by Kit Galloway in the 1980 conceptual work *Hole in Space* (29), in which a life-sized video "hole" collapsed the space between New York and Los Angeles. Although Galloway's metaphor for punching through physical space with mediated space is very direct, it still speaks

strongly enough that competitions have recently taken place that explore the boundaries between worlds.

Turbulence.org's 2007 *Mixed Realities* commissions (30) address the paradoxes of works stretching across multiple worlds. Works by John Craig Freeman, Usman Haque et al, Kildall & Scott, Magruder et al and Proske et al were selected for their engagement with Second Life, online/Internet, and physical interactions. These include constructing works in virtual worlds and everging/controlling them and creating multiple interactions. One commissioned work that takes the Galloway metaphor and expands it as interactions as signals reverberate between worlds is Proske et al's *Caterwaul* *(31)*. Far from the somewhat utopian messages of human connection in *Hole in Space*, the Proske piece features the first line, "When someone screams in real life, do they hear us in virtual reality? Do they want to?" For this work, a 12'x15' wall is embedded with five microphones and a series of speakers linked to Second Life through a MAX/MSP patch. In *Caterwaul*, the gallery sounds are transmitted to the Turbulence server, and to the Second Life space, but through the translation to the virtual, the sounds reverberate, degrade, and feed back to create a howl of lamentation. Drawing parallels to Quaranta's comments regarding the distortions between multiple realities, *Caterwaul* takes Galloway's connective portal and injects the self-reflexivity of the semiotic gap to illustrate the imperfect translation between worlds.

Another group that has used the Galloway metaphor to explore the linkages between spaces is the virtual performance art group, *Second Front*. Consisting of nine members, from Vancouver to Milan, Second Front probes the social issues of virtual worlds through critical and playful situations. Their October 4th performance for the opening of the IMAL new Media Center in Brussels, entitled *The Gate* *(32)*, was a trompe l'oeil of Rodin's *Gates of Hell* that looked out upon a portal that fed live bidirectional video between the Odyssey Island art sim and IMAL. In tangible space, the *Gate* is a life-sized projection of the writhing tableau vivant avatar sculpture and reception area, while a similar area is evident in the virtual. Even though the metaphor to Galloway is evident, the distortions remain as Rodin's vision erupted with hails of pontoon boats and anvils from a faucet at its top, reiterating the irruptions between the virtual and the tangible.

One other aspect of *Second Front's* praxis that illustrates their self-reflexivity regarding the nature of performance across multiple worlds is the dissemination of their interventions as media performance itself. Paying attention to the question as to how many people can constitute an online audience at a time, *Second Front's* recontextualizes its performances as edited performance machinima and narrative blog. The goal is that multiple audiences from the viral/machinima, blogosphere, and *Second Life* art cultures are addressed through dissemination of information in manners/gestures tailored for the given audience. Where this re-presentation of performance through different media channels, adjusting the message to fit the medium and mode of delivery becomes problematic is at the boundary of performance it questions. Given this question, are *Second Front's* different media interventions merely different forms of documentation, or media performance, with differing time scales of audience feedback? It is at this fundamental questioning of time, space, performance, and representation that virtual art challenges traditional and Internet New Media,

CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay, we have traversed between the tangible and virtual while combining the possibilities of moving from one to the other, as well as artists operating in simultaneity in multiple worlds. In musing upon the movement from one to the other, it is hoped that this essay has at least provided some formal, modal,

and contextual issues as grist for the ongoing conversation on the development of art created within virtual social worlds. The range of praxis that artists engage with is highly multivalent, from the relatively direct transmediated oeuvres to the enigmatic liminal works that live between worlds, and the wholly virtual; works that illustrate a form of embodied conceptualism. Although the works we have explored are extensive there are others such as Alan Sondheim/Sandy Baldwin, Adam Nash, Annabeth Robinson, Nathaniel Stern, Avatar Orchestra Metaverse and many others whose SL-based work engage in other performative, formal and conceptual practices. While this early analysis (in terms of this genre, at least) suggests that artists may initially engage in recreating the tangible as a process of orienteering in virtual worlds, or even a Greenbergian reiteration of marketing/kitsch, practices diverge broadly after making the initial step into the virtual. Ironically, while the bulk of the market is centered on the transmediated, the most widely recognized works are in almost all the other representational modes; the remediated (Mattes), evergent (Hershman-Leeson), virtual (Cao Fei, Babeli), and cybrid (Second Front). Each addresses their modality, context and audience outside of the virtual, even outside the New Media community, and therefore makes an argument for their apparent acceptance. The engagement with elements of virtual worlds within contemporary art presents challenges for artists and audiences alike. What is obvious from work of the mid 2000's is that it represents a site of intense inquiry and cultural activity, and it is hoped that this essay will contribute to the conversation regarding art from virtual environments, its distinctive qualities, and its evolution.

REFERENCES/FOOTNOTES

(1) King, Brad & Borland, John. *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture, From Geek to Chic*, pp. 221-228, McGraw Hill, San Francisco, USA 2003

(2) Grau, Oliver. *Virtual Art*. pp. 8-10, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA 2004

(3) Wands, Bruce. *Art of the Digital Age*. pp.104-105. Thames & Hudson, New York, NY, USA 2006

(4) I have heard Novak use this term at the BNMI Emotional Architectures Summit (Banff, Alberta, CA, 2001,) but another reference is online at http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~frederico/main/pages/works/Biophotonic.htm

(5) Anders, Peter. *Envisioning Cyberspace*, McGraw Hill, San Francisco, CA, USA 1998

(6) Hoberman, Perry. *Systems Maintenance* video archive http://framework.v2.nl/archive/archive/leaf/other/.xslt/nodenr-142973, Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, 1998 (7) From Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Beacon Press, Boston USA 1961

(8) Antin, D. "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium." Video Culture: A Critical Investigation. Ed. Hanhardt. New York, 1986.

(9) Reuters, Adam. *Virtual Porn Illegal in Italy*, Reuters Second Life online news, http://secondlife.reuters.com/stories/2007/02/23/virtual-child-porn-illegal-in-italy/, Feb. 23, 2007

(10) *Dollbox* exhibition website, http://dollbox.vox.com/library/post/q.html June 9, 2007

(11) Lichtenstein, Therese. *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*, University of California Press, 2001

(12) A synopsis of the lawsuit filed against the Cincinnati CAC over the Mapplethorpe exhibition can be found at: http://law.jrank.org/pages/3469/Mapplethorpe-Obscenity-Trial-1990.html

(13) Canning, Simon. "ABC's virtual site 'griefed'," News.com.au, http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/story/0,23663,21780235-7486,00.html May 23, 2007

(14) Definition, *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, Random House, New York, NY, 2005

(15) Greenberg, Clement. Ibid.

(16) Abramovic, Marina. *Seven Easy Pieces*. Guggenheim Museum, NYC Nov. 9-15, 2005, Online documentation: http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/abramovic/

(17) Mattes, Eva & Franco. Website: http://www. 0100101110101101.org

(18) Kildall, Scott. *Paradise Ahead* (description website) 2006-
http://www.kildall.com/artwork/2007/paradise_ahead/paradise_ahead_description.html'

(19) Mattes, Eva & Franco. *Thirteen Most Beautiful Avatars*. Installation, Postmasters Gallery, New York, NY, USA, 2006 http://www.postmastersart.com/archive/01org_07/01org_07_window1.html

(20) Beuys, Joseph. *7000 Oaks*. Documenta 7 (1982), Dia Center for the Arts, New York, NYC Online Documentation: http://www.diacenter.org/ltproj/7000/

(21) Mattes, Eva & Franco. *7000 Oaks*. Documentation:
http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/performances/performance-beuys.html, 2007

(22) Bleecker, Julian. *When 1st Life Meets 2nd Life: The 1685 Pound Avatar and the 99 Ton Acre*, NearFutureLaboratory.com. http://www.nearfuturelaboratory.com/index.php?p=297 February 9, 2007

(23) Lisberger, Steven, et al. *TRON*, Walt Disney/Buena Vista Productions, 1982

(24) Hershman-Leeson, Lynn. *Life to the Second Power*. Online archive:
http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/LynnHershman/261 2006-7

(25) Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

(26) Although William Gibson is best known for his descriptions of cyberspace in his 1982 novel *Neuromancer*, in his 2007 book *Spook Country* he alludes to the merging of spaces, or even evergence of the virtual into the real by describing the "extrusion" of the virtual into the real through locative media.

(27) Quaranta, Domenico. *Semiotic Phantoms*. Videoludica.com
http://www.videoludica.com/news.php?news=706&lang=en, July 30, 2007

(28) Gazira Babeli Website/archive. http://www.gazirababeli.com

(29) Galloway, Kit. *Hole-In-Space*, Online documentation, http://www.ecafe.com/getty/HIS/, project date:1980

(30) Turbulence.org. *Mixed Realities* commissions, http://transition.turbulence.org/comp_07/awards.html 2007

(31) Proske, et al. *Caterwaul*. Online proposal,
http://transition.turbulence.org/comp_07/proposals/proske/index.html 2007

(32) Second Front, *The Gate*, IMAL Interactive Media Arts Laboratory, Brussels, Belgium, Online Documentation http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/009770.php, Oct. 4, 2007