

[-empyre-] Missive 3: The Issue of Remediation

- *To:* "soft_skinned_space" <empyre@lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au>
 - *Subject:* [-empyre-] Missive 3: The Issue of Remediation
 - *From:* "patrick lichty" <voyd@voyd.com>
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The Issue of Remediation in SL Art

Two pieces of work that are probably the most famous Second Life - based artworks besides Cao Fei's Cosplayer are Eva and Franco Mattes' Thirteen Most Beautiful Avatars (a remediation of Warhol's piece, which showed at Postmasters) and Beuys' 7000 Oaks, which the Mattes' performed in Second Life as part of their "Synthetic Performances" series.

13 Most Beautiful Avatars

<http://0100101110101101.org/home/portraits/thirteen.html>

7000 Oaks:

<http://rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=25069&page=1#47185>

In addition, I would also like to add Scott Kildall's "Paradise Ahead" series, which included remediations of:

"Claim" (Acconci),

"Leap into the Void" (Klein),

"Shoot" (Burden, done with Jeremy Owen Turner),

"Fall II " (Bas Jan Ader),

"Cut Piece" (Yoko Ono, done with Jeremy Owen Turner),

"Lift" (Fiona Tan)

"Electric Earth" (Doug Aitken)

"The Ninth Hour " (Maurizio Cattelan)

"Remake" (Pierre Huyghe, done with Jeremy Owen Turner),

"Rest Energy " (Marina Abramovic & Ulay, done with Jeremy Owen Turner),

"I Like America and America Likes Me " (Joseph Beuys)

"The Staircase " (Peter Land)

There are others, such as this artist's remediations of Abramovic/Ulay works with Gazira Babeli, Turner's remediation of Fluxus scores, etc.

The tradition is clear, from the creation of the Fluxus score-concert and its many reiterations to 2005's Guggenheim performance of seven historic performance works by Marina Abramovic. But what is curious is the function of performing performance scores in various contexts, and of the remediation of "synthetic" performances in virtual worlds like Second Life.

The oddity of remediation of performance scores in Second Life appears to have three main issues: context, history, and embodiment. As performance art sought, in part to derive artistic a/effect through the

immediacy of the viscera, remediation of performance onto the avatar creates an ironic tension between the physical and the virtual.

EMBODIMENT, CONTEXT & AFFECT

For the first and last of my points, it seems to me that separating the issues of embodiment and context are problematic at best. It seems that in the case of virtual worlds like Second Life, that the ironies created by the remediation of works is closely linked to the juxtaposition of the relationship between the physical and virtual. For example, if Abramovic's Red Star were to be recreated through artful retexturing of the avatar and proper posing, what then becomes of the investiture of the flesh? One could say that the gesture becomes wholly symbolic, but residents in Second Life clearly have investiture in the avatar as extensions of themselves. For example, I was in an amateur poetry corner in SL which had a poster that had a picture of a very wholesome looking young female avatar. Beside the image was a poem that was entitled "The Better Half of Me" that extolled the virtues of the avatar and how Second Life residents should respect their avatars as nothing less than their realization of their idealized selves. In addition, Sherry Turkle's extensive research into online identity has repeatedly shown the affective connection to online identity.

A prime example of avatar and affect is shown in an (anonymous) exchange between two early associates in Second Life. The first, was a young designer from New York who started off her time as a virtual escort who specialized in anything including taking child forms and copulating with bestial forms. After this period had abated, the designer confided in a writer acquaintance who burst out in epithets like "Tramp" and "Filthy Whore", and subsequently banned her from the house, while the designer remarked that to her it was "just cartoons".

This example shows the differing degree of affect ascribed to the avatar, and makes some case for possible affective results in the case of performance art. However, the embodiment of a work can have further ironies in their recontextualization within virtual worlds.

For example, one of my favorite (and more problematic works is the Mattes' recreation of 7000 Oaks. From their Rhizome press release, they state:

" Beuys' project begun on March the 16th 1982, at Documenta 7, in Kassel.

His plan called for the planting of seven thousand trees, each paired with a columnar basalt stone. Beuys intended the Kassel project to be the first stage in an ongoing scheme of tree planting to be extended throughout the world as part of a global mission to effect environmental and social change.

The Mattes are reenacting Beuys' work "7000 Oaks", staging the new performance in the synthetic world of Second Life. The first virtual tree and stone were planted on March the 16th 2007, exactly 25 years after the original oak was planted.

The 7000 basalt stones have been stacked on Mattes' island in Second Life: Cosmos Island. The diminishing pile of virtual stones will indicate the progress of the project, which will go on until all 7000 oaks and stones will be placed. Second Life inhabitants will have the chance to take part to the performance, placing stones and trees in their lands."

Statement, Rhizome.org

<http://rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=25069&page=1#47185>

The key irony of this work is the cultural function that Beuys' 7000 Oaks has versus the Matte's remediation. While the form is recreated, and perhaps creates a method of awareness of environmental issues through Second Life, but according to calculations by Julian Bleecker, each avatar generates a carbon footprint equal to that of driving an SUV 1293 miles.

<http://research.techkwondo.com/index.php?p=297>

Therefore, the oaks in 7000 Oaks become incredibly complex signifiers for and against the original intent of the Beuys work. The question arises as to what portion of the original intent remains in the work, if at all, if it is a merely a gesture-simulacrum of the original, an uploading of historical content for a young, ahistorical world.

HISTORY AND VIRTUAL ORALITY

One possible reason for the creation of reiterative work is the ephemerality of online culture. According to an ACM article, annual "Link rot" can reach from 10-20 percent, (http://portal.acm.org/ft_gateway.cfm?id=286557&type=pdf), and previous forms of primary records such as personal correspondence is currently in the realm of E-mail, and highly fugitive in terms of historical research. In many ways, it parallels the Gibson book "Agrippa" in which the reader purchases a floppy disc which systematically erases itself as they progress through the text, until nothing is left except a blank diskette and a living memory.

Similar ahistoricities are evident on Second Life, as after my having moved from my original land holding in Han Loso, I returned about every two months to find that the dominant players in the region were almost always different. The apparent attention span of SL culture seems to be relatively brief, and from my experience, seems that SL demands "now" and "as much time as possible online" time, as the evolution of the social milieu depends, not only with the continued refreshing of online content (aka the Web), but with the constant refreshing of social networks in order to maintaining one's place in the Second Life cultural memory.

Secondly, can it be said that cultures without history require an influx of external histories in order to create an identity? Parallel to Baudrillard's and DeTocqueville's commentaries on the United States, 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? It seems likely that the remediation of Warhol's soup can as attacking sculpture, tumbling paintings of nudes down a virtual staircase, or forests of virtual oaks be a natural expression of cultural ahistoricity in virtual worlds? To paraphrase Baudrillard, Avatars have no identity, but they do have wonderful teeth...

The creation of remediated, "synthetic" works (to quote the Mattes) follows a strong contemporary tradition of reiteration of performance-based works in order to preserve their degree of affect in space and time. However, the remediation of performance/time-installations in virtual spaces tends to raise as many questions as they resolve. It straddles the formal grounds of avatar as body proxy and the viscerality/immediacy of performance and installation art. The works become ambivalent, playing with our affective connection to the avatar while not actually sinking the blade through the skin,

shooting the bullet, etc. It holds us in the anxious moment before the trigger pulls, the razor cuts, with the historical referent and the gesture all in place, with our memories of the vestigial flesh and its history holding the gut taut.

- **References:**

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