

# [-empyre-] Missive 4: Second Life and the Question of Audience

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## Art in Second Life and the Question of Audience

When thinking of the creation of art for online worlds like Second Life, the question of the audience comes to the fore. The conception of the audience for SL - based art shapes the discursive nature of art in any virtual world, with SL being one. The issues at play in regards to addressing the audience with virtual/engine art are relatively tiered. That is, the question of engaging audiences in virtual worlds, has to do with whether one's intent is to solely address the virtual world in itself (interactive/persistence), the modes of representation, whether documentation will be the work in itself, and the modality of that documentation (text/image, time-based, etc).

The question that I have in regards to the addressing of audience is analogous to that of the proverbial tree falling in the woods. If it's virtual, and only five people have been on the server in the past month, is it being effective? Taken to extremes, a story that broke in February 2007 was that of the "Second Life Liberation Army" setting off "particle nukes" on various servers to protest the Linden labs' sole control of Second Life. While it made many of the major American news feeds, to quote one blogger, " t's not a big deal. It's happened all the time. There have already been so many more destructive ... attacks against the grid in the form of replicating objects, and nobody called those terrorism."

<http://www.cydeweys.com/blog/index.php/2007/02/25/second-life-goes-nuclear/>

A second instance has to do with the inauguration of Columbia College Chicago's I Am island, which hosted part of the Manifest school-wide senior art festival. Also during that day, a student protest against the lack of health benefits for the contracted security workers was ovccuring. Earlier in the day, the physical protest was dispersed by Chicago police, but live projections from the island were being displayed to vice presidents at the opening, and protesters arrived in-world to try to get their placards in front of the eyes of the administration. It was quite clever, as someone obviously knew where

the administrators would be, but the only reason why the message as not seen was that their timing was off by about fifteen minutes.

>From these two instances a number of concerns in engaging audiences are evident. In performance/time-based works (which usually only have a maximum audience of perhaps 40-50), how can the artist guarantee the intersection of the audience beyond the moment of the event? For SL-based work, in that a maximum of about 40,000 people worldwide have any access to the work, how can one expand their potential audience? How can SL-based works engage larger audiences than those which are solely in-world? And, being that SL is 3d as well as time-based, how does one document the work for larger audiences in a way that properly represents the art?

Different artists have chosen to do this in different ways that address whether the work is being documented or remediated for objective production. Angrybeth Shortbread's time/sound-based works are well-documented through online videos. The "captures" do not give the onlooker the actual feel of interacting with the in-world works, but they do give a good 'gist' for the events and the audiovisual sensotia associated with them. Also, artists like Kildall and the Mattes are creating derivative works from the performative moments that few would have actually seen through the creation of high-resolution print. I believe Cao fei used live projection in the Venice Biennale while her Cosplayer was in its space. Other artists use methods specific to their practices, as Gazira Babeli places her "objects" (code snippets out on gazirababeli.com), as well as Virtual Surrealist machinima.

Where the addressing of audience gets delicate is that audience engagement comes in close proximity to the rampant promotional culture of Second Life. Part of the reason it has grown and survived as long as it has is due to a tightly managed PR/marketing campaign through partner companies such as Millions of Us (PR firm which was the media outlet for Linden Labs to nearly all the major media channels) and Electric Sheep (lead content developers). The ubiquitous PR/entrepreneurial culture that is part of Second life is probably something that cannot be completely removed from in-world practices, challenging the artist to confront how they relate to that aspect of world's culture.

But I digress. As I have been talking about how various artists and events have propagated their memetic content, I'd like to describe (with all apologies for any conflation between representation strategies and PR) how Second Front has tiered the development of its work for broader audiences than in-world.

For those of you who have been to an SF performance, it is usually happening-based, places itself in various contexts, and operates in a very dynamic fashion. Whereas our first public performance at Ars Virtua (Border Patrol) was highly scripted and had a dedicated audience, it guaranteed only a certain number of people. Currently, when Second Front does not have enough of an audience, it usually finds a region with enough avatars to constitute an audience of 20 or more. Avatars already at the performance are teleported along, and the whole event is videoed by 2-3 people in the group.

The second tier is re-editing of performance video. As with much performance video (e.g. the Kitchen Fluxus tapes) the record does not represent the event well. From this, Second Front recontextualises the recorded performances as "performance edits". These are remediations of the event, everging out of the virtual to video, which represent the

"plot" of the performance with a great deal of creative license. These are then distributed on the various viral media nets (YouTube, Google, etc).

And lastly, from Jeremy Owen Turner's practice as Avatar/performance blogger, the Second Front blog (<http://www.slfront.blogspot.com/>) partially explicates the group's activities and partially creates a pseudo-narrative for the group, following Turner's work of blog-as-performance. Within the blog, the videos are embedded, giving a full circle to the practice.

In addition, artists within the group are using derivative media for gallery practices, but what I think is important for contemporary artists working within SL in contrast with artists using SL as the central channel for their entire practice is the multiple levels of representing the work for different cultural milieus.

Thank you for listening, and I apologize for putting so much text out at one time. Some of the text here will be in an upcoming Leonardo article, and this is a good place to work some of the ideas out in real time.

In gratitude,

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"It is better to die on your feet  
than to live on your knees."

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- **Follow-Ups:**

- [RE: \[-empyre-\] Missive 4: Second Life and the Question of Audience](#)
  - *From:* "Christy Dena" <cdena@cross-mediaentertainment.com>

- **References:**

- [\[-empyre-\] fwd: post from AnnaBeth](#)
  - *From:* "Melinda Rackham" <melinda@anat.org.au>
- Previous by Date: [\[-empyre-\] Missive 3: The Issue of Remediation](#)
- Next by Date: [RE: \[-empyre-\] Missive 4: Second Life Residency and Audience](#)
- Previous by Thread: [Re: \[-empyre-\] Missive 1: Reply to Annabeth.](#)
- Next by Thread: [RE: \[-empyre-\] Missive 4: Second Life and the Question of Audience](#)
- empyre August 2007 archives indexes sorted by: [\[ thread \]](#) [\[ subject \]](#) [\[ author \]](#) [\[ date \]](#)

- empyre list archive [Table of Contents](#)
- [More information about the empyre mailing list](#)

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