ETC

New World Evolutions: *Transmute*

Caroline Langill

Numéro 89, mars–avril–mai 2010

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/64209ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN
0835-7641 (imprimé)
1923-3205 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu
Within the history of new media, Second Life (SL) is a surprisingly recent phenomenon. This virtual platform for a parallel world was created in 1999 by Philip Rosedale, former Linden Lab CEO. The verb created is intentional here for the emergence of SL is ongoing as its participants/users evolve the cyber-world they inhabit. Coming a long way from its first iteration where most of the activity was comprised of bombing buildings and landscapes with grenades, SL now includes not only fantasy worlds, but also institutions that complement real world sites. With the advent of university campuses in SL, it seems reflection on activity in this cyber-world community is warranted. Camille Turner’s exhibition *Transmute* at the University of Toronto Arts Centre, in conjunction with the Subtle Technologies Festival in June 2009, focuses on SL as a space of potential creativity, collaboration, and production. This is not necessarily a new notion. Since online communities have been in place artists have utilized virtual space for art practice. Anachronistic performance artworks peppered the landscape of...
Dancing with Myself

No Matter,

comment on this canny artist’s

incumbent on me to stop and

Dancing with Myself

performance
to the audience. Lynn Heller’s

engagement reveal themselves

as multiple layers of possible

only three artists, two of whom

bition appears quite spare, with

money in virtual worlds.

its “dungeons and dragons” aes-
tistic enough to be referred to as

comes to a halt, whereas we know the avatar can go on ad infinitum, at least until the plug is pulled or the battery dies.

avatars, there are sessile users clicking away. This image brings
to mind Tom Sherman’s video work HALF/LIVES (2001),
where solitary women and men sit staring at screens while a male
voiceover, drawn from an answering machine, laments having
missed the machine’s owner. With that in mind, one might
consider Heller’s dancing as somewhat cautionary. During the
performance the artist is at pains to keep up with the eternally
youthful Nar Duell. She eventually tires and the performance
comes to a halt, whereas we know the avatar can go on ad infinitum, at least until the plug is pulled or the battery dies.

Scott Kildall and Victoria Scott’s contribution to Transmute is the
collaborative work No Matter, a thick, analytical project that both
celebrates and critiques the potential for creative production in
virtual communities. For this project Kildall and Scott commis-
sioned SL builders to construct “imaginary objects.” Pandora’s
Box, Kryptonite, Trojan Horse, The Maltese Falcon, and Red Herring
are just a few of the objects which likely have as many possible
representations as readers. Construction was at the discretion of
the builder and once completed the works were simultaneously
premiered — online at the Ars Virtual Gallery in SL and at the
Huret & Spector Gallery, Emerson College, Boston. It was an
inspired decision on Kildall and Scott’s part to manifest these
objects in the real world. To achieve this each object was decon-
structured into a flat plane and then, as a real world image, printed
out as paper cut-outs with tabs for reconstruction. This enabled
two iterations of these objects, the first as flat prints and also as
reconstructed paper objects, which are eerily reminiscent of their
virtual counterparts.

Scott and Kildall capture and bring forward the spartan nature of
the SL world. Char Davies, an artist who is alone in her mastery
of virtual reality as a medium, has suggested that “resolution is
over-rated” and I tend to agree with her.2 When presented to us
on their faux-wood shelving units and plinths these imaginary
objects embody the joie de vivre of SL habitation While the
labour invested in this construction has been documented for
online audiences in both hours and cost — the builder was paid
in Linden dollars which currently has an exchange rate of 250
Linden dollars to one US dollar — most of the works required
far less investment than would their real world counterparts. This
is the charm of the imaginary objects. Quick and naïve, they
capture the infantile aesthetics of children’s toys, particularly as
paper renderings. The No Matter website documents the scope
of the project, taking an instrumental approach to the econom-
ics of constructing numerous artworks by builders from across
the globe — Chicago; Mexico City; Paris, France; Jacksonville,
North Carolina; Amsterdam; Scotland, among others. An ironic
scaffolding to the folded paper objects in Transmute. When developing his theories of evolution Charles Darwin re-
ferred to the process of species change most often as transmutation, as described in the Transmutation Notebooks.3 During the nineteenth
century, transmutation, transformation, and evolution meant more or less the same thing. Turner’s astute titling of this exhibition
draws the viewer back to the nineteenth century with its high
degree of innovation on the part of scientists, theorists, and artists.
Heller, Kildall, and Scott share the spirit of curiosity prevalent dur-
ing that prolific period of change where scientists were theorizing
our connections to our environment. The scrutinization of SL
which Heller, Kildall and Scott undertake hearkens back to their
romantic counterparts who critiqued the age of mechanization and
intellect they lived in. Transmute brings into relief the complexity
of the new world of SL, which, if it continues on its present rate of
change, is with us for a while.

Caroline Langill

Caroline Seck Langill is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and curator living in
Peterborough, Ontario. Educated at Ontario College of Art with an MFA from York,
and a PhD in Canadian Studies from Trent University, her research spans the fields
of science and art. As a researcher in residence at the Daniel Langlois Foundation in
2006 she explored the history of new media art in Canada, noting the pioneering
nature of much of the work produced by Canadian artists working with electronics
and computers in the 1970s and 1980s. She has extended this project into new
research on the preservation of new media, knowledge migration, and machine/
human behaviour. Her most recent publications include chapters in Place Studies
in Art, Media, Science and Technology: Historical Investigations on the Sites and the
Migration of Knowledge (VDG 2009) and Leonardo’s Choice: Genetic Technologies and
Animals (Springer 2009). She is currently Acting Associate Dean, in the Faculty of
Art at Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto.

Notes

1 In April 2009, Ontario College of Art and Design celebrated two years of its campus
in Second Life.

2 From a talk by the artist given at Gender, Subjectivity, Embodiment, and the
Transformation of Cinematic Practice in Contemporary New Media Art: Exploring
the Interactive Work of Char Davies, Tounj Dave, and Zoe BELOFF Symposium on
Feminist New Media Art, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Québec, April 2004.

3 Richards, Robert J., Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and