FCJ-070 Art and (Second) Life: Over the hills and far away?

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Introduction

I must admit a general unease yet compulsive fascination towards the emerging social environments in Second Life. Partly I am wary of the time commitment associated with learning and developing the necessary skills for a full community participation in Second Life. By this I am referring to both time to develop both the technical proficiencies as well as the time to develop and maintain friendships and community connections that combine to actualize a socially participatory experience appropriate to a resident rather than a tourist or visitor. Here time becomes a currency, and while every artist and researcher must invest time, it is the consideration of extra time at a networked computer that must have as its consequence less time in the grounded experiences at 'home', with my immediate and very physically located friends and family. In this sense I confess that my observations and enquiries are more grounded upon my occupying a position of academic researcher (an outsider or tourist), than a fully participating member of the Second Life community.

This paper reflects my introduction to one particular artist while we were both exhibiting at the ISEA 06/Zero One digital art festival and symposium in 2006, and examines his recent work in online world Second Life. At this stage, DC Spensley (and through his avatar Dancoyote Antionelli) had been receiving attention for his contribution towards a definition of art in this popular online world.

This paper will document the ideas and philosophies of the artist DC Spensley, who has an extremely prolific practice across media that we may consider as an explosion of art production and use of Second Life particularly as an exhibition context. In some cases the artist is showing work that developed from a personal practice of digital image-making well before Second Life appeared online. In other cases his creative work is entirely produced by using the Second Life scripting language. His intensive research has resulted however in a substantial oeuvre and many new works.

In some ways this examination is fuelled by my personal research interests surrounding the rhetoric of decontextualized communication within online worlds such as Second Life, that suggests that we leave much of our local context behind when we enter into the mediated spaces of Second Life, and adopt 'new' names and roles. It is my hypothesis that we drag with us much of our attitudes and intents from our local material context, but this is a research proposition in its very early stages.

Rather than unpacking a case study to make claims about what art 'is' or 'might be' in Second Life, I aim to not decontextualize myself as a researcher, and art viewer. Rather I will consider the development of identity, value and art in Second Life, while keeping my own position and material context grounded in New Zealand. It is my aim that through negotiating a relationship between the contemporary art practice of DC Spensley and art histories within the settler culture of New Zealand we may finds links or useful precedents that may help contribute to a developing understanding of art in Second Life.

To discover these links, some of the values surrounding DC Spensley's artistic success will be explored, particularly questioning the role and position of Spensley's work in this managed social software experience designed to enable creative play and interaction. These will be compared briefly to other kinds of online art and also to some art historical practices in New Zealand.

I have divided the paper into two sections. The first part of the paper will examine the artist, his philosophy and achievements. This has been developed from interviews with the artist as well as additional web-based research. Dancoyote Antonelli is the name and form of DC Sopensley's avatar. Malia Ventura is my own avatar. The second section will consider the context in which Spensley's art is produced and read. This will begin with an examination of the role of representation, contexts and methods of art history. A further examination of context will be developed through a positioning of art and environment, particularly addressing the environmental metaphors of Second Life. Here I will consider colonial precedence and use examples drawn from New Zealand art histories to consider the role of art in new environments.

Discussion will draw upon contemporary research frameworks as well as contemporary art strategies that question specific relationships to site, to examine whether established art historical models can be transposed into digital worlds and their emerging art histories in useful ways, or whether other methods need to be developed.

PART 1. THE ART OF DC SPENSLEY aka Dancoyote Antonelli

Hyperformalism: the artwork of DC Spensley

DC Spensley, or as he is known in Second Life, Dancoyote Antonelli, is a relative newcomer to Second Life, but his work in digital media began many years ago. A graduating student completing a traditional art training at San Francisco Art Institute, Spensley has been working with pixel-based art since Photoshop 1.0. It has taken more than ten years however for the appropriate exhibition medium to evolve for this current work. Second Life has become the home and proper place for his digital imagery, animations and conceptual forms. Spensley however has also found a very real market in online art collectors trading, Spensley says, in scarcity and authenticity. In one interview Spensley positions his art in terms of market value:

> Most art in SL until my entry was sold as copies like shoes. I found that there are real collectors in SL who love the chance to have an original and trust me to guard their investment. It is a pact between me and each collector (McCaw and Spensley, 2006).

Further to this Spensley explains his carefully crafting of this market:

> I am cultivating an 1980's style art boom in SL and attempting to define value of fine artworks in a virtual medium (McCaw and Spensley, 2006).

Image 1: The artist avatar Dancoyote Antonelli stands next to a sign for his large-scale work Modernist Marvel. Photograph by Ellen McCormick

Spensley's personal philosophy outlines three developmental stages of online art as it has evolved rapidly in Second Life. The first generation involves imported images ranging from imported digital paintings to scans of paper-based images and even reproductions of photographs. Second generation work is made entirely in Second Life, using available materials in the world: the free, off-the-shelf textures, scripts and objects are available to any user or available free on the Second Life grid. Third generation work is a hybrid of the first two. In the following excerpts from an interview Spensley outlines his terms:

> *Malia Venture*: what is a digital painting in terms of first generation work?
>
> *Dancoyote Antonelli*: a digital painting is native to the digital format, it is not a photograph but made with math inside of a computer for this medium, like hyperformalism, in many cases it is native to digital, which makes it original when uploaded (McCaw and Spensley, 2006).

Spensley describes his art philosophy, devising his own terms 'hyperformalism' and 'opnetics' as a way to theoretically position the abstract digital art he creates with software tools. His work incorporates both 2D 'paintings' and 3D 'sculptures' and incorporates static, moving and fly-through formats, architectural design and production and performance direction.

In DC Spensley's own blog (www.spensley.com), he defines hyperformalism thus:

> Hyperformalism is an aesthetic philosophical construct that may be employed to describe a late 20th century, early 21st century mass art phenomena consisting of scores of personal computer users generating abstract, often spatially unique artworks with software tools. These spatial realities have no analog [equivalent] in the physical world, and instead of making reference to physical reality, create a unique continuum of reference; a rearrangement of photons to illuminate alternate worlds of form, shape, color and space.

He continues:

> The term Hyperformalism is derived from the combination of the words Hyper and Formalism (as described by Wikipedia) and is being used here to describe aesthetic self expression without anthropomorphic, or representative context. This separates Hyperformalism from digital collage, aesthetic photo manipulation and other forms.

From this we may paste together ourselves a definition of hyperformalism based on 'hyper', a prefix generally added to confer presence in more than usual or three spatial dimensions (hypertext, hyper-real), and 'formalism', referring to an art movement which places an emphasis on form over content or meaning. Stallabrass (2003: 34) cites an interest in form as one of two

major developmental threads in early internet art. This thread he suggests is evident particularly in the computer games industry and the drive towards 'the ultimate goal of virtual reality'.

Spensley's hyperformalism however does not strive for a hyper-real scenario. He adds that hyperformalism is neither anthropomorphic nor representational, though hyperformal art may resemble natural formations or even employ naturalistic algorithms. Spensley's hyperformal artworks however never contain recognizable elements like text, figures, landscapes, objects and concepts relating to humanity. Rather we may consider Stallabrass' conclusions relevant regarding the relationship of early Net formalist artists to Modernism:

> ...the Net formalists could not be formalists in the old way, if only because of their acute and historical consciousness about the meaning and fate of modernism...yet the insistence of their references to it suggest the deep affinity felt with their predecessors, based upon a shared engagement with novel and fast-moving technology (2003: 35).

In this sense Spensley is engaging directly with his chosen material, and context, but without reference to human action or effect, despite his highly social engagement in the production and exhibition of works. He believes that digital imaging tools 'naturally' lead from an abstractive language; the tools themselves are mathematical abstractions governed by algorithms. One of the unique qualities of the tools, Spensley reports, is the 'undo' function, allowing 'fast iteration and endless variation'.

In a conversation in Second Life Spensley writes

> hyperformalism is my answer to the pathetic nihilism of postmodern theory, it is my way of saying enough is enough! Let's get back to basics, let's re-enchant art practice with wonder and de-anthropomorphize art practice, and appeal to a different lobe, an older lobe: formalism in hyper medium (McCaw and Spensley, 2006).

It is curious that for Spensley, this 'older lobe' resides in the values and contexts of pre-digital art movements.

What is Real?

In the curator's notes for group show The Real (April 2006) at Second Life's online gallery Ars Virtua, James Morgan reflects on Second Life as an area where we can share a common experience of the virtual. DC Spensley's work, he comments, reminds us of the numbers and commands that exist underneath our visual assumptions. Spensley's level of reality, he suggests, is drilled down into the function of the machine: we experience the abstract beauty of the formula (https://arsvirtua.com.exhibitions).

Image 2: DanCoyote Antonelli as artist at work, photograph by Ellen McCormick, August 2007

Reflection upon the emerging history of online and digital artworks reveals a wide variety of approaches, among which we find other artists who share Spensley's concerns with the 'material' of digital media. The artwork of Karl Sims, such as Galapagos (1995) also uses algorithms, creating works that appear to grow in response to simple audience triggers. The artwork in this case is a system, inspired by Darwin's theory of natural selection. '"Genetic" organisms seem to develop within their own environment inside the computer' (Rush, 2001: 206). In contrast however, Spensley's works do not respond to audience interaction, but remain art as object. Greene suggests that the theatricalization of data in art practice is exemplary of a wider phenomenon – the theatricalization of all spaces, which she suggests has been developing as a result of entertainment culture and television media, calling into question ideas of boundaries and definitions of interface (Greene, 2004: 133-134). Artists and writers on digital art, such as Christiane Paul and Rachel Greene, connect other generative and software art movements with earlier precedents of conceptual art movements including Fluxus, drawing parallel concerns between the tools of representation and enactment (Greene, 2004: 163).

While Spensley's 'paintings' are constructed using the same 'materials' – software and algorithms – available to all residents of Second Life, his construction of these works as art (and exhibited by DanCoyote Antonelli as artist) positions these works in an economic relationship not consistent with digital art histories. Nevertheless, we can imagine that these works, in their attention to formal qualities, communicate the unseen in this digital environment, otherwise highly concerned with representation (Rajchman, 2005: 392).

Along with Hyperformalism, Spensley uses his own term 'opnetics'. Opnetics refers to the optical and kinetic collaborations that evolve from Spensley's works, where translucent 'paintings' shimmer and slowly move and merge in animated layers within their surrounding environmental space. In other cases images, light and effects surround an artwork temporarily, as choreographed layers flowing through space. We may consider Spensley's opnetic features both as a cultural product and a dynamic visible process.

Image 3: ZeroG SkyDancers poster, original caption: 'ZeroG SkyDancers 15/06/06, think aerial water ballet…', photograph DC Spensley. Sky Dancers perform choreographed works using specific movement commands of flight, available in Second Life. Depicted here is also the crafted architectural space within which the dancers perform (right hand image), as well as the more traditional seating arena in which the audience remains seated for the spectacle (top left image).

Art Exhibitions, Communities and Economies

DC Spensley exhibits mainly in Second Life galleries, and is an active developer of online art exhibition venues. The artist (at the time of interview, August 2006) had built and was managing seven galleries in Second Life, and working also within existing Second Life gallery sites such as Ars Virtua, a Second Life project gallery (https://arsvirtua.com).

To further communicate his work and opinions the artist maintains several websites outside of Second Life:

> I work solely on patronage and private sales: patronage for land to exhibit, and sales for collectors who must have original art. My economic model is deliberate. When I make a new piece I place as many copies for display as I want. But when it sells, I take them all down. I have found that people want unique things in SL [Second Life], and not copying makes the value increase if the collector resells in RL ['Real Life', or offline]. I also create jobs in SL. Already I have a team of two scripters, two builders, two sales reps and one clothes designer to help me create and communicate my newest generation work.…My goal is to have 100 locations in SL, all with different work (https://uvvy.com/index.php/Dancoyote_Antonelli).

Spensley's strategy and art community-building resolve have clearly paid off. Popular with Second Life art investors and publics alike, Spensley's prolific art practice is making waves and attracting attention. The artist achieved over half a million Linden dollars worth of sales (the Second Life online currency, convertible to US dollars) in his first three months of exhibiting in Second Life, a meteoric rise to fame unlikely in offline art economies. Spensley does however seem to have mastered the digital languages specific to Second Life, both for creating and marketing visual art objects, as well as a clear and fluent grip on the background code, an understanding that has helped him to position his work in the evolving online capitalism of Second Life.

This involves the development of his avatar character DanCoyote Antonelli. According to Anhinga Chaika, exhibition curator for The Bluffs Nature Preserve and Center for the Arts, '…he is magnetic…His work is fresh, it is alive, it has passion!' (www.metaversemessenger.com/pdf/2006/06/MM-2006-06-06.pdf).

Dancoyote regards his involvement in the art market as part of his conceptual art practice, and working within an historic moment:

> Dancoyote Antonelli: It is a conceptual piece, taking place in a capitalist petri dish…yes the term 'original art' is up for grabs and I aim to solidify it.

He goes on to talk about the relationship between his art objects and conceptual approach:

> *Dancoyote Antonelli*: I make objects still
>
> *Dancoyote Antonelli*: but perform neologism, as art as well
>
> *Dancoyote Antonelli*: I name things and twist the metanarrative
>
> *Dancoyote Antonelli*: my objects have always had rich layers of meaning as well
>
> *Malia Ventura*: objects and ideas live together in the art world, here and in the other life
>
> *Dancoyote Antonelli*: intended and unintended, yes, however in SL there is scripting, I call scripting the 6th finger. It is our adaptation to life in metaverse… that is where I am on fire. (McCaw and Spensley, 2006).

These values are reflected across Spensley's practices and sites. Spensley is involved particularly in one development project as Lead Architect and Producer in Uvvy Island.

According to the Uvvy 1.0 design notes:

> Architecture in SL is user interface. User interface serves a purpose to guide a user to certain content and facilitate what the user wants to do with that content. Pursuant to this I propose that while some aspects of 'brickspace' may be useful as familiar analogies, brickspace concerns should be discarded when SL native solutions, not analogous to brickspace, provide for better user interface design (https://uvvy.com/index.php/Uvvy_1.0_design_notes).

Uvvy Island Design Principles aim for a 'Sense of Wonder and Confidence, (to) Make it Fun and Intriguing, Interesting and Informative', and these principles are clearly echoed in Spensley's art values and practice.

Spensley does not stop with painting and architecture. Recent works have ranged from choreography of Sky Dance performers, through to landscape art. Spensley's aeronautic dance troupe takes advantage of the Second Life 'fly' function, with complex choreography and coded visual effects performing under the name of ZeroG. ZeroG have performed on several occasions, including ISEA 06/Zero One in San Jose.

Image 4: Audience members gather for the ZeroG performance, Second Life screen shot, photograph DC Spensley, August 2006

An example of Spensley's landscape art can be found in the Second Life online campus NMC's 'Artists on the green' project, where Spensley created several temporary shimmering animated and textured 'landscapes' for limited periods on August 12 2006.

Image 5: One of Spensley's four contributions to NMC's 'Artists on the Green' project, August 12 2006. Spensley chose to use the 14 acre campus site as his canvas, temporarily etching in to 'grass' and creating temporary landscapes, forms and layers to existing geographies.

IP and digital culture

Within his first three months the artist encountered a range of problems surrounding IP and digital culture, telling a narrative of deceipt and misrepresentation. In August 2006 Spensley writes:

> There is a SL celebrity that keeps taking pictures of my work and publishing these photos as hers. At times (she would go as far as exhibiting the works) giving only bylines to the artists.

The artist talked to the 'celebrity' twice about the problems relating to IP, before responding through his art practice.

He discusses his reaction:

> Dancoyote Antonelli: But here's the art: I commissioned a script that opaques a painting when she is within 25 meters of the work.
>
> Dancoyote Antonelli: If she takes photos of original art she needs to license the photos like anyone else, or get permission.

Spensley retells his action as an art response, aligning it to an 'art action' of the conceptual art movement:

> Dancoyote Antonelli: Well the script is conceptual art
>
> Malia Ventura: Yes the script is yours, as well as the script that opaques a painting: a perfect solution in this medium.
>
> Dancoyote Antonelli: The truth is there are even more damaging ways to hack into a work in SL (McCaw and Spensley, 2006).

In this story Spensley crosses values between art historic precedents, using strategies he aligns with conceptual art actions, as well as holding onto traditional modernist concepts of ownership of visual art, images and IP. The question must be considered whether digital art that is positioned within the economy of Second Life is able to avoid the capitalist separation of original and copy. It is precisely the copy and paste commands that Spensley cites as valuable tools in his iterative production that threatens the terms of his ownership.

Between Two Worlds

Spensley is working across platforms and is aware of the crossovers and what there is to be gained and lost in the digital translation. On one hand Spensley has been working in pixel-based images for many years, and an online world such as Second Life has the potential to offer so much more

than a website as an online exhibition context. On the other hand he notes that offline experience offers riches too.

70 'I am a fine artist in real life and Second Life, but digital fine art is NATIVE to SL', says Antonelli, who has taken to being an established resident in an astonishingly short time. 'I was born to be here. I have been making art since Photoshop 1.0 and have many digital generations iterated into the bodies of work. Each time I take the work out into RL by scanning and photography and bring it back into the digital world, it gains'.

71 Spensley defines art value in this sense as 'transformative'. Interestingly his aspirations remain focused upon traditional offline centres. A modern art historical relationship of artist to audience is alluded to with his intentions to see his art find a place in traditional fine art institutions.

72 Just sitting on a computer, this work is trivial, just files in the eyes of many, not respected as fine art yet. But displayed and viewed in SL, it transforms magically into the fine art I intended it to be in the first place. I fully intend to show the SL art in the MOMA [Museum of Modern Art], Whitney, Tate and Guggenheim.

73 So what is the proper place for art?

PART 2: ART IN ITS PLACE

74 The second half of this paper will consider the emerging art practice, environment and economy of DC Spensley and Second Life. It will consider possible connections between the values and methods of Spensley's practice with some Western art historical traditions, some internet and online art traditions and colonial art histories as they have been documented in New Zealand over the last 100 years in order to consider what has changed and possible emerging features of new spaces for art such as those developing in Second Life.

Representation, context and methods

75 At least since Plato the theory and practice of visual arts have been founded almost exclusively, upon the relationship between the real and its copy. This duality has shaped the writing of art history as a story of the conquest of the real… and has helped to define modern art movements, like abstraction, that consciously rejected iconic resemblance (Camille, 1996: 32).

76 Western art histories have traditionally valued representation. Artists' abilities to create images that were illusory and could tell stories highlight the tension between illusion and truth, genuine and copy, that are among the core values of early Western visual art. But art has not always been evaluated solely on its ability to create a likeness. Vasari, writing during the Renaissance, is credited with writing the first extensive art history of this period. He also sets out the ground rules for methods of evaluating art. Vasari includes connoisseurship and humanist principles as well as visual likeness and visual illusion (which help to define the boundaries of beauty) as important qualities for evaluating Renaissance art (Fernie, 1995: 11). In contrast contemporary Art Historian Eric Fernie defines art histories in terms of methods, which he claims are in turn defined by their historic and social contexts (Fernie, 1995: 9).

77 While art historians of the early twentieth century abandoned some of the earlier methods of evaluation and understanding art (including the importance of likeness and illusion), some aspects of these earlier methods and values have pervaded. On the whole artwork was still perceived as the successful production of individual genius and twentieth century art history is still considered as a canon of great names. Other interpretive languages such as pschychoanalysis were added to these earlier methods, but remained techniques of connoisseurship. Art appreciation for much of the first half of the twentieth century remained firmly a part of 'high' culture, and institutions, such as museums and galleries continue to protect the kinds of knowledges that surround the visual languages of art, as well the artifacts themselves.

78 Camille points out that even art movements such as abstraction, where Spensley positions himself as aligned with Formalism, (an abstract movement that rejected pictorial representation) is nevertheless positioned within a dichotomous relationship surrounding representation (Camille, 1996: 42).

Representation, context and methods

79 I first discovered online worlds in the early 1990's in the form of text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) and MOOs (Multi Object Oriented online games). These very evocative and imaginative

shared social experiences continue to intrigue me. As the graphic capabilities of networked personal computers accelerate and technical literacies become common languages, online worlds are becoming increasingly visual. MUD worlds were once descriptive texts, personal and shared storytelling environments more related to fiction- or script-writing. And yet 3D worlds such as Second Life through their visual allegory, are evoking different relationships to these performative sites, and draw from different histories, communities and evaluative languages.

80 The issue of representation then does not only relate to art and its emergence as a defining term in Second Life. All citizens and visitors in this world must (as a part of their logon procedure), engage in making visual choices, in the initial creation of their avatar. Avatars are visual representations of our online characters. They are how we see ourselves, as a constructed identity in Second Life, as much as they are how we present ourselves to others. Yet these avatar images are not based upon values such as likeness or authenticity. When we choose our visual identities from a range of (initially) predetermined options, some likely roles come with them. From the colour of our skin to the size of our nose we are choosing costumes that have been associated with other mediated stereotypes. The question of the relationship between the original and the copy is always present in our shared interface, its connection both attractive and troubling. Through our avatars we inhabit two locations, and we are able to cross between them using visual and textual cues.

81 Image 6: avatar selection window, screenshot from Second Life

82 As a recent technology of visualization, game genres differ from earlier art technologies such as photography or painting, and have different histories. The evolution of social networked media, from MUDs and MOOs though to Second Life, has required a major shift in the literacies of users. At one time in the 1980s and early 1990s a good word-per-minute typing speed and a lively wit were the skills required to gain respect and contribute to many and multiple running conversations in a MUD. As technology developed, the use of hypertext and embedded images added scope to how we might navigate or traverse connections between offline and online personas, and between synchronous and networked social spaces.

83 Second Life, like other 3D game genres, is still low in terms of resolution and likeness. There is no convincing relationship to illusion. However we are required to relinquish our 'consumer's relationship' to these images and, as literacies develop, we may begin to associate all 3D graphic scenes as landscapes that may be navigated from a first-person perspective. As online worlds such as Second Life grow in population and architectures, we also begin to see these architectures and forms as ever-evolving and constructed from an infinite combination of primitive shapes. While technically anything is possible in this toybox of our imagination the combinations people do choose to create, regularly rely on representations of that which is already familiar.

84 The significant shift occurs as consumers of game cultures become increasingly invited to take the role of producers. The opportunities for audience-members to redesign themselves as creative participants in the environment and culture of Second Life is a popular and accessible example of this shift. And while this is not a shift for MUD players, who have regularly taken on the role of producer, the tools of visualization have changed. The entirely visual content of Second Life draws upon histories and behaviours that are not necessarily drawn from prior game technologies, and we witness a convergence of media and art histories and literacies from the sparkling blue eyes of our permanently teen bodies!

85 While new tools of visualization offer the potential to develop a visually democratic agora, offline, the role of aesthetic judge and arbiter has traditionally been negotiated between architects and designers, artists and town planners. As noted historic and sophisticated systems exist to ensure that aesthetic education and decision-making is circulated through the portals of high culture. Offline 'experts' govern the design of our cities and habitats, our entertainment and certainly our art. This leads inevitably to the question of 'what makes art different' in a visual, creative and participatory environment such as Second Life? The example of DC Spensley suggests in part that it is these offline systems, at least in the emergence of this art economy, that have served to define the role and position of art and artist in Second Life. Spensley's language and training have offered him the perspective of a visual expert and this is the role he plays as DanCoyote Antonelli – a highly crafted persona of a traditional artist.

86

Spensley regards his hyperformalism as 'the art movement that the art world missed – a broad proletarian explosion of art'. He characterizes this proletarian aspect as

87 > scores of personal computer users generating unique artworks sharing technical and aesthetic discoveries specific to their medium with each other on the World Wide Web. Their material is the pixel, their medium is the electronic display delivered to the viewer via the Internet, and the occasional visionary art venue (https://uvvy.com/index.php/Dancoyote_Antonelli).

88 In addition, the terms of economic value surrounding Spensley's art rely on there being 'scores of computer users' but not that they all must consider themselves artists. As Spensley himself points out, scarcity and authenticity are the conditions if his trade.

89 It then seems inevitable in this context that traditional offline notions of connoisseurship, patronage and ownership related to art are being conserved. And yet Spensley's art is not something you might buy in order to make your Second Life living spaces a little prettier. The scale of Spensley's 2D and 3D work in most cases would require a hefty investment in land purchase and the construction of large scale architecture. Walter Benjamin's renegotiation of art after technology predicted that advances in technology would eliminate authenticity, as a criterion of value (Schneider Adams, 1996: 63). We are seeing the opposite propogated in this Second Life art practice and economy. Spensley has commissioned code to protect his authenticity from particular characters/players who challenge this notion. This action emphasizes the traditional art historical values of individual artworks as an act of creative genius, by an authentic producer. While any visitor can capture a screen shot of Spensley's work, it is his desire to control the reproduction and distribution of that image, not only as source code, but as an art object.

90 So what might potentially unique aspects of art in Second Life be, if as Spensley claims the term 'original art' is still being defined?

91 While Spensley's success can be measured in economic terms, it is more difficult to evaluate in terms of its social and theoretical contribution. To understand and negotiate the role and potential definition of art in Second Life, we will need to acknowledge the omnipresence, not just the availability, of the tools and materials of art in this context. The theoretical approach of second wave Marxist art writers such as Ernst Fischer may be useful, encouraging the creative act of work. For Fischer people gain control of their world through the use of tools. 'A subject-object relationship [that] only occurs through work' (Schneider Adams, 1996: 61). All building in Second Life, from objects of art to building and personae requires an engagement in creative processes.

Landscape: the environment visually perceived

92 Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can be understood only as a part of a wider history of economy and society (Appleton, 1984: 11).

93 For us to consider Fernie's approach for understanding art through the context in which it is produced and seen, it is necessary to acknowledge the environment and emerging economies of Second Life as this context. An online 'world', Second Life, like many of the terms of the internet, references geographic metaphors. Second Life is built upon, and relies on our fundamentally familiar relationships to landscapes and social interactions that occur within them.

94 It is Cosgrove's argument that habits of perception ('ways of seeing') of societies can be constrained by various combinations of circumstances of social, cultural and economic kind (Appleton,1984: 12), and this can be said to apply equally to both the reading of art as well as ways of seeing landscapes.

95 Intuitions towards landscapes (as well as intuitive responses towards art) are 'transformed, overlain and mediated by social, cultural and economic as well as personal meanings' (Appleton, 1984: 12).

96 A useful 19th century example of this relationship to landscapes can be seen through the cult of the wilderness, a profoundly social and nostalgic consideration for landscape that is not inhabited by humans. Also emerging out of times of huge technological change, namely Britain during the Industrial Revolution, wilderness can be seen as an idealization of particular landscapes in terms of leisure and tourism, retreat and refreshment, pure and 'natural' in comparison to impure urban environments that is maintained in our contemporary imagination. Not coincidentally this was also the era in which New Zealand was being settled, a far away wilderness for consumption. More generally countryside becomes constructed as an antithesis to the city and it is not surprising that

this countryside metaphor was the initial visual metaphor employed by the designers of Second Life (Aitchison et al, 1995: 51).

97 Appleton suggests despite this socio-cultural molding that we in part recognize landscape as an archetype, and he uses the example of the widespread attraction which people feel towards 'parkland' as an idealized, contrived arrangement. I am suggesting that Second Life is constructed more as a parkland than a wilderness. Its natural features include benevolent green rolling hills atop islands, and sea you can fly through. Conveniently this modeled rural landscape is empty and pest-free when purchased, 'homely, stable and ahistorical' (Aitchison et al, 1995: 50). It is free from environmental concerns, the grass doesn't need to be mowed. We are visitors-as-residents and we rely on the controlled stasis of the environmental metaphors, more similar to a holiday house we may visit regularly than the neighbourhood we return to after work.

98 Image 7: Spensley's cultivation of an 1980's style art boom, where art is seen in an economic continuum following from real estate and pornography suggests historical precedence. Screenshot from the Second Life website explaining land sale.

Colonial precedent

99 The model inferred here is highly colonial. Second Life is positioned as a Terra Nullius and this applies layers of colonial meaning and association.

100 The term 'terra nullius' is from Latin origin, meaning 'no man's land', or empty land, not possessed already by people. It has a close relationship to the term 'res nullius' which denotes objects that are not yet owned, such as wild animals, or abandoned property. The two terms form the legal the foundation and justification for colonial enterprise, whereby the act of 'finding' and 'occupying' land was justification for claiming ownership of that land, and its occupants: generally defined as fauna (res nullius). The relationship is primarily based upon the principles of economics. If land is not producing economic value then it is un- or under-utilized. Land and its use value become synonymous with ownership.

101 We may easily recognize the abuses of these legal concepts through cursory examination of South African and Australian histories, where nomadic indigenous peoples were considered not to be occupying land because their land value systems contrasted with those considered economic. Second Life is modeled on a highly metaphoric and endlessly extendable landscape also viewed in economic terms as real estate.

102 Danny Butt in his essay on Local Knowledge (2005) proposes three impassable contradictions, related to settler culture, indigenous culture and location. One of these Mapping – the most basic function of the colonial process – Butt writes, functions by turning a profoundly social relationship with the land characteristic of indigenous culture, into data.

103 And while the designers of Second Life created a land conveniently without indigenous people, its first owner (the Linden Corporation who establishes initial trading rights for each 'new' island) and the Linden inhouse building tools frame the world. I suggest that the way that we construct the formation of culture in this empty land draws upon a colonial model and precedents. The research question that follows from these initial considerations is: is it possible to have new empty land that allows for a different model of colonization, or will older models prevail? And how can we consider art in this relationship?

Major differences

104 There are of course fundamental differences between the colonization of material geography and the relationship we have to the metaphoric landscapes of Second Life. The first major difference begins with our relationships to our avatars as body-metaphors, which online have no material needs other than a broadband connection to our keyboards, requiring neither food nor shelter. The laws of sustainable land usage, and the effects we may have within an environmental ecological system based upon material relationships therefore may be abandoned. New systems evolving in Second Life are based upon social relationships and economic models, with a limited range of tools ('native' proprietory software) accessible to all. As noted earlier, time becomes a currency as it enables users the opportunity to master these tools and social languages. This is also evident in the artwork of DC Spensley, whose prolific art activitiy is enabled through many hours of education and practice. What we experience within this emerging and participatory

culture is the realisation, or potential realisation, not of needs but of desires. And we witness increasing numbers of inhabitants in Second Life realizing their desires in traditional off-line ways. According to DC Spensley, the first economies to develop in Second Life were real estate and followed closely by pornography. It is Spensley's prediction that an art economy will follow.

Image 8: From Second Life homepage February 2007

Representing landscapes

To return to the subject of emerging art histories, I am attracted to make a comparison to art histories that have emerged in other colonial settings, specifically looking towards New Zealand colonial art histories, which have been dominated by landscape painting.

For the sake of simplicity, I suggest that there have been several periods of artists in New Zealand in the last 150 years that have been acknowledged with the role of contributing towards colonial understandings of place and belonging. I will choose examples from two of these periods.

The first wave of European artists sent to New Zealand may be illustrated using the example of the work of Charles Heaphy. Heaphy was appointed artist and draughtsman by the New Zealand Company, based in England and joined Colonel William Wakefield in a preliminary expedition to New Zealand in 1840. His initial role and duties while traveling around the country was as artist and surveyor, though his entry in Te Ara, an online New Zealand encyclopeadia, also lists him as 'explorer' (https://www.teara.govt.nz/1966/H/HeaphyCharles/HeaphyCharles/en).

While the purpose of these original British artists was to document new territory, their resulting images tell stories of a new place, more based on desires and economies than on mimetic or documentary representation. Heaphy's energetic role went on to win him political status and employment. Te Ara however identifies his chief successes as an artist.

Heaphy is remembered mostly for his neat maps and for his paintings and drawings of the New Zealand scene. These are more than the accurate topographical illustrations the New Zealand Company employed him to produce; the best of them are illuminated by some poetic insight; most of them indicate his struggle to come to grips with the savage landscapes so alien to one brought up in the milieu of the traditional English water colourists.

Heaphy's 'tidied up' landscapes were intended to create desire and a sense of the exotic in order to please his employers and encourage more immigrants to join him in this tamed landscape. The painting (below) of Mount Taranaki, also documented online in the Te Whenua me Nga Tangata, Land & People Project at Otago University is accompanied by the following caption:

Charles Heaphy's spectacularly symmetrical Mount 'Egmont' painted in 1839 aimed to attract settlers to the New Zealand company's 'beautiful' New Plymouth settlement. His deliberate omission of the heavy rain forest between the coast and mountain represented an early form of real estate 'spin' (collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library) (https://www.otago.ac.nz/nzpg/land_people/index.html).

Image 9: Charles Heaphy 'Mount Egmont from the Southward' 1840

Feeling out of place and creating an art true to Pakeha (European settler) culture independent of Britain became a primary concern of early twentieth century New Zealand-born artists. One of the most recognized for his contribution to this kind of art knowledge was painter Colin McCahon. McCahon (1919–1987) is credited as New Zealand's first painter of international significance, but is interesting here for the role he played in helping an emerging colonial nation state help to see itself. Colin McCahon might best represent the second wave of New Zealand artists.

Image 10: Colin McCahon, Mapua landscape, 1939, medium: grass stalk 'pen' & ink, 'finger-pushed' on paper. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamaki

Early work of McCahon's such as Mapua landscape (1939) shows the artist developing a visual shorthand for recording his relationship to the landscape, using the materials of the land (grass stalk, pen and ink) as well as his own fingers to physically integrate this relationship of people and place. Literally pushing ink upon the surface of his painting and scratching the surface with grass stalks dipped in ink McCahon's shorthand reveals a deep study of the landscape.

It is McCahon's later paintings however that became iconic, and represented a shift for McCahon, but also for settler culture in New Zealand. Landscape and religion combine to communicate McCahon's humanist message. Often generalized abstract New Zealand landscapes were used as

contemporary settings of religious events, and increasingly landscapes became employed for its symbolic content. Large painted fields, and hand painted texts are well recognized elements of McCahon's paintings, upon canvas, board and large scale panels. The iconic value of this work was a collective social recognition of the landscape as a visual trope. Perhaps most significant however was the promise that despite much imported (colonial) content in New Zealand culture, meaning may be written and read in local settings and environments.

118 image 11: Colin McCahon, As there is a constant flow of light we are born into the pure land, 1965, medium : enamel paint on hardboard. Collection of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.

119 This painting with text and landscapes uses two of the visual communication devices employed in Second Life.

120 For McCahon the landscape, while depicted as empty, was already full of God, a spiritual connection to the land borrowed from (or perhaps recognized in) traditional Maori worldviews. Nicholas Thomas writes that

> 121 the deep association between indigenous people and the land provided strong and condensed reference points for a colonial culture that sought both to define itself as native and to create national emblems (Thomas,1999: 12).

122 It is both the realization of the auratic nature of the landscape, and its potential role as a theatrical set in which richer meanings can be played out that informs McCahon's particular vision. In this sense the landscapes, usually empty of people, may be seen as a local 'Garden of Eden', and a site from which embodied (self) realisation emerges, an omnipresent and invisible creator casting texts towards us. There is some analogous relationship that can be drawn here between McCahon's landscapes and/as texts, and the function of land in Second Life. An omnipresent and invisible creator (the Linden Corp) lies also behind the tools and metaphors of our emplaced interactions. The Garden as theatrical set is also a model we can recognize, although the religious message to the children of the garden relies more upon the promise of economic gain and eternal youth.

123 Since McCahon, new forms of travel and communication technologies have changed our geographic and cultural horizons. A recent illustration of the use of simplified messages fusing these changes can be seen in a current Air New Zealand marketing campaign set to be released on television, in cinemas and within the urban landscape, on billboards. The campaign values the importance of 'being there', and associating this national airline as the way to accomplish this, with close metaphoric association with New Zealand's landscape, but also drawing upon our familiarity with flying over landscapes in Second Life. One television commercial depicts a person working in a cafe in the northern city of Auckland. He walks outside to a jetty looking sad and doleful. He then jumps into the air and flies the length of New Zealand to land outside a landmark building in Dunedin (a southern city, some 2 hours away by air) to kiss his girlfriend. The key visual analogy however is that he flies over empty land and at the same level above the earth that he would fly in Second Life. In an online press release Air New Zealand marketing manager Steve Bayliss says the 'Amazing Journeys' theme exemplifies the heart of Air New Zealand's brand.

> 124 Central to our brand promise is a set of beliefs that include our belief that 'the only way to truly say I love you is with a hug', and that 'we live in the most inspiring place on earth'.

125 This is characterized by an attitude typical of McCahon's spiritual relationship to the landscape, but with a Second Life perspective.

> 126 'The campaign showcases New Zealand's stunning landscape through breathtaking aerial shots. It creates powerful dreamlike sequences and encourages viewers to have a romantic connection with, and sense of pride in their country,' says Mr Bayliss.

127 And just like Second Life the actors are everyday folk:

128 In keeping with previous Air New Zealand campaigns, staff were involved in the creative process by submitting their personal 'amazing journey' stories (https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/BU0701/S00234.htm).

Site and cultural production

129 Other tools and strategies need to be investigated as possible alternatives to assist and enlargen the current framing of art and its role in Second Life. Contemporary art theories that may provide

useful alternatives to traditional models include site-specific methodologies and decolonial methods.

130 Curator and researcher Claire Doherty writes that contemporary art is no longer produced in a studio in isolation

131 > ...we have witnessed the convergence of site specific, installation, community and public art, institutional critique and political activism (Doherty, 2004: 10).

132 Doherty cites Miwon Kwon's understanding of site which has shifted from being a fixed, physical location. Rather Kwon and Doherty concur that site is constituted through social, economic and cultural processes. A new vocabulary (Doherty, 2004: 10) bound with social engagement marks the 'new-ness' of this participatory art. While these two researchers are in fact referring to material geographies, their re-construction of site as fluid and culturally engaged and responsive may offer useful clues toward a new definition of online contexts. It is perhaps through these concerns that we can re-imagine the role of art in Second Life as a part of a constructed social and economic field, rethinking colonial relationships to site through engagement with representation and context, not in opposition but through a necessary and negotiated tension.

133 Sara Diamond suggests that new technologies demand a shift in the way that we observe, absorb and respond to technology. She notes that:

134 > technology is a material force: while social, cultural and economic structures shape technology, technology also acts back on social, cultural, economic and physical bodies. The materiality of technology and of the image (which acts not only on language but as a language on us) are in constant tension (Diamond, 1996: 134).

135 These sentiments are echoed by Judith Mastai who adds that digital technologies signal a deep suspicion of a single truth and that contemporary curatorial practices must reflect multiple communities and therefore consider multiple ideologies (Mastai, 1996: 152).

136 Decolonial methods may assist us to consider landscapes, people and belonging in ways outside of colonial thinking. Writers such as Edward Said among others have drawn attention to the link between imperialism and high culture (Thomas, 1999: 7). Subsequent art writers such as Nicholas Thomas claim that the way to include a presence of indigenous art in the contemporary art world, is to refocus on meanings which are examined from a distinctive, local vantage point (1999: 8). Colonial relationships emerged not only from governorship from afar, but also through direct contact and local interactions. Thomas claims that the settler relationship is a particular discourse, claiming both utopian visions and antagonistic intimacy (1999: 10).

Conclusions

137 To return to Spensley, while his art is neither representational, nor concerned with landscape, we may recognize an engagement with the forms and materials of a new environment. His contribution to a growing definition of art in Second Life relates particularly ideas familiar to traditional offline art. Spensley's work can help us to consider a bigger picture of what art is, and what art might be, and how art may be located in emerging online worlds such as Second Life in other ways. It is perhaps curious that Spensley's work does not sit easily within, or develop from the emerging traditions of internet-based, or online art histories, but rather reflects the dominant model of Second Life as a capitalist simulacrum. Spensley's personal positioning within this world reflects this economic model ahead of cultural or art historical concerns. And will further and future research in contemporary art and art movements in Second Life reveal other references and directions artists forging these connections in a world where everybody has access to the tools of art-making?

138 Attention to the context of Second Life helps us to position artwork within a landscape (cultural and metaphoric) that artists' works emerge from and within which they are read. While currently we see reflected the centrality of the relationship of value, art and ownership, art has the potential to reach outside of these economic concerns. As with offline settler cultures, art will play a role in the development of a tenuous cultural distinctiveness, explicit and visible in Second Life. The risk is to not create a too narrow definition of art and culture that could encourage or support existing homogeneity.

139

It is clear that we will need to sharpen the tools passed on from previous disciplines (such as traditional art histories), and to develop new tools where necessary, to navigate this new territory and to avoid following false trails observed from our offline histories, acknowledging that there remains a risk of suppression of cultural diversity, and of cultural simplification.

140 If we are to acknowledge that art is effective in defining social relations and meanings, then art may radically redefine them. In order to do this the languages and avenues for art criticism will need to inform artists, collectors and publics alike, and not just a market economy. Fora for discussion and exhibition also must evolve, that are open to forms of art that are not-so-traditional and invite people who have not yet tried the 'role' of artist so that they may help to stretch definitions in useful ways.

Author's Biography

Caroline McCaw is a Senior Lecturer and Academic Leader in Communication Design at Otago Polytechnic, in Dunedin, New Zealand. Her research interests include examining situated creative practices, participatory art and design, and particularly the relationship between material location and networked culture drawing from examples in the fields of

both art and design. Her design and art practices perform these research interests, through work in publications, mixed reality, and multi-location art events. She is actively involved in the Aotearoa Digital Arts network, and contributes to a wide range of community activities. Caroline is a PhD student at Queensland College of Arts, Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She has published papers, curated and exhibited digital art internationally, most recently exhibiting work at ISEA06.

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Images

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8. 'Mount Egmont from the Southward' 1840. Watercolour on paper. 37.7 x 60.7cm signed Charles Heaphy, collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Purchased 1916, published in Charles Heaphy by Briar Gordon and Peter Stupples, Pitman Publishing, Petone New Zealand, 1987.
9. Colin McCahon, Mapua landscape, 1939, medium: grass stalk 'pen' & ink, 'finger-pushed' on paper. Collection of of Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand. accessed 23 February 2007, PENDING APPROVAL (permission kindly granted by the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust to reproduce this image).
10. Colin McCahon, As there is a constant flow of light we are born into the pure land 1965, medium: enamel paint on hardboard. Collection of the Robert McDougal Gallery, Christchurch New Zealand, PENDING APPROVAL (permission kindly granted from the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust to reproduce image).

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