

Chapter 12

Kritical Art Works in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

The main thrust of this chapter is to interrogate current creative practice as it develops in form and content within the new Virtual World platform of Second Life (SL). Kriti is an SL island for playful experimentation and research, it is becoming known for showing art works, not as a virtual gallery emulating a real life space with walls, ceiling and hung paintings, but as an island with installations, screened works, land-works. Works are built in SL only to be exhibited in SL, they are not imported copied images of real-world objects, they are to be visited by the SL community through avatars, delivering that odd, uncanny experience of distance and nearness at the same time. The first Kritical Works in SL show was curated for screening at ISEA2008 in Singapore, the artists were SL practitioners familiar with, but intent on pushing the creative possibilities of the platform. The second exhibition Kritical Works in SL II curated for ISEA2009 now includes real-world artists beginning to explore SL, and examples new interests in bridging the virtual world to real-world gallery spaces. A Kritical Works panel brought together curators and artists to discuss the second exhibition and further unpack the issues and challenges of creating art works in SL while addressing the role of the curator within this.

The chapter outlines the curation process for both of the exhibitions; presents the artists' ideas and works; and with the panel's insights, (some of whom are somewhat skeptical of an artist's intent where SL work is concerned) draws them together into a new reading of art in Second Life.

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VIRTUAL WORLDS, ART AND SL

Virtual Reality (VR) constitutes a wide variety of applications associated with its immersive and highly visual 3D environments. Michael Heim identifies seven different approaches to using VR: simulation, interaction, artificiality, immersion, telepresence, full-body immersion, and network communication. (Heim, 1993) Although there are many applications for this technology, mainly simulated conditions for emulating real-life learning experiences, as used in medical and military training, there are also artists exploring VR for its new aesthetic possibilities and immersive qualities. Although there has been extensive research in VR and virtual worlds within the humanities and sciences, there has been little research undertaken concerning the use of virtual worlds for creative practice. A particular feature of SL is the accessibility of the platform for building and customising spaces. Using the SL building tools to create objects and manipulate terrain, along with the application of the SL programming language, it is possible to have a high level of control when creating a virtual environment. This has enabled a growing community of artists to take advantage of both the capability and online accessibility of the platform, and of the relatively low cost incurred when compared to that of developing a unique online virtual world from scratch. Second Life (SL) is a relatively new virtual world launched on June 23 2003, developed by Linden Lab in California as an Internet community. Its *Residents* interact with each other through avatars to socialize, explore the plethora of islands on the *grid*, and to create and trade virtual property and services with each other *inWorld*. When launched there were barely 1,000 users on board, there are now over 16 million with an SL account. (Rymaszewski 2007:5) It was envisioned primarily as a commercial venture, and still serves as so, but anyone can hire/buy an island and build on it as fancied. There are currently over 500 art gallery islands, with a growing market economy, these

mostly emulate real-world galleries with imported digital images on show. More interesting online spaces such as *Odyssey* (www.art-virtual.jimdo.com) have started to exhibit works made on the open platform itself with the SL 3D modeling toolset provided, these works are objects in constructed space that might invite avatars to walk, or fly, through them, around them, in the sky, on land or undersea, to enjoy sounds made in this spatialised audio environment – to experience the spatial nature of the works themselves.

Kriti offers a similar space to artists with experimental projects, but it has a research agenda attached too.

KRITICAL WORKS IN SL

The University of Wolverhampton purchased an island on the SL grid in July 2007 initially for the purpose of pedagogical and doctoral research in digital media. Since then Kriti island has developed to host a number of events, research projects and experimental works. Following the first *inWorld* exhibition on Kriti in 2008, and five years into the new SL platform itself, this online space rapidly assumed a sense of real presence for those involved and became a focus for collaboration, nationally to the UK and internationally. The *Kritical Works in SL* exhibition showed the work of ten artists in Second Life and as part of the Inter-Society of Electronic Art event (ISEA) in Singapore. The project aimed to bring together a range of art works from the SL community to explore whether common themes were emerging for creative practice on the platform: Where there perhaps certain characteristics of the virtual fabric of the SL space? Was there a possible maturing of the languages and spaces within SL? Was there a commonality of approach to creativity and aesthetic values? The works can speak for themselves but a clearer explanation of intent was required from the artists themselves towards clarifying the project questions. Each artist contributed a paragraph on their

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