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The installation as avatar: Curating political works of virtual reality

INTRODUCTION

The matter that forms the world of 3D virtual reality (VR) is as vivid as the center of a black hole. Looking into the depths of CGI-composite texture, one finds it a cohesive, infinite void, terrifyingly sensual, empty and still. When the void assumes the slick, CGI-rendered appearance of the urban landscape, taking on the structure of a simulated social environment, it transforms into a web of subterranean personal and psychological desire. Every composite object, every face, action and word is the fulfillment of a lack. Skins are shed, cities and warzones are built - the depths of this insatiable mouth are able to bear the possible horrors of any real or imagined terrain. Projects such as Superflex's "Karlskrona2" (1999), Wafaa Bilal's "Virtual Jihadi" (2008), and Cao Fei's RMB City (2009) have exploited these very properties in their use of the format of 3D interactive games as a tool of political critique. While without intervention, it is true that "media […] are mainly an environment whose effects largely differ and disregard political contents and conscious intentions",[1] these artists' projects spotlight the consumptive, neutralized universe of VR as a behemoth of globalization, summoning it as a mirror to the raw, inescapable realities of systematic violence, war, or urban injustice. Reflexive of the medium's own avowed artificiality and limitations, they exploit the dynamics of immersion, alienation, and digitalization inherent in VR games in order to invite the possibility (or impossibility) of public participation and reflection on local and individual histories, conflicts, and desires.

By offering space for performative modes of public interaction as well as fictive and fantastical models of subjectivity, these virtual reality works show how interactive virtual reality creates a psychological shift for the viewer, acting as a field of transcendence in its dissolution of local specificity as a basis for social awareness, discussion, and engagement. Documented and

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[1] Berardi, Franco. "The Paradox Of Media Activism: The Net Is Not a Tool, It's an Environment." *Ibraaz* (2012): n. pag. 2 Nov. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2013.

exhibited in myriad international biennials, museums, and galleries, each project shows how at a point in the last decade artists and curators have attempted to deal with a reversal of the domination of the physical context, of which the digital is ordinarily but a paltry cousin. As these works exist in their intended form as social sculptures online, proliferated through blogs, user communities, and discussion forums, they are site-specific to the blurred dynamics of local and globalized authorship and viewership of the Internet. The challenge for curators of VR works, then, is the dissemination and presentation of the discussion surrounding their object of focus in the face of its stark absence, as well the task of achieving a sense of spatial and conceptual fluidity with cyberspace. This essay shall investigate ways in which VR projects have been curated in physical exhibitions, and how curators and institutions have attempted to resolve the physical/virtual binary inherent in the works through display tactics, either leading toward or eschewing entirely the terms of their political discussion. What kind of dynamics do the structures available in virtual reality worlds provide as a political and social theater, which changes and compromises the economy of physical exhibitions?

PART 1: KARLSKRONA2 (K2), 1999

Superflex (c. 1993) is a Danish company/contemporary artist group at the crossroads of political activism, entrepreneurship, and creative expression, using its economic position as a global brand to tackle specific local issues through "tools" of multifarious media and systems. Superflex asserts their activity as "socio-economic integration […] working within art to take hold of the possibilities it offer[s], "a space in which to experiment, free from the bonds of convention."[2] Situating themselves at the lynchpin of the tangible and intangible, Superflex orchestrates experiments in activism and social change through strategic economic gestures, navigating the contradiction in their identity as both local agency and global entity.

In 1998, they were one of the first artist groups to imagine virtual reality's potential as a tool for social dialogue. One of their first projects under the mantle of SUPERCITY (an exploration of urban initiatives) was "Karlskrona2" - a tool of social integration and community dialogue implemented through the then-rudimentary VR platform. The community of the Swedish city of

[2] SUPERFLEX. "An Exchange Between Åsa Nacking and SUPERFLEX." Interview by Åsa Nacking. *Superflex.net*. Afterall, 1998. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://www.superflex.net/texts/ an_exchange_between_aasa_nacking_and_superflex>.
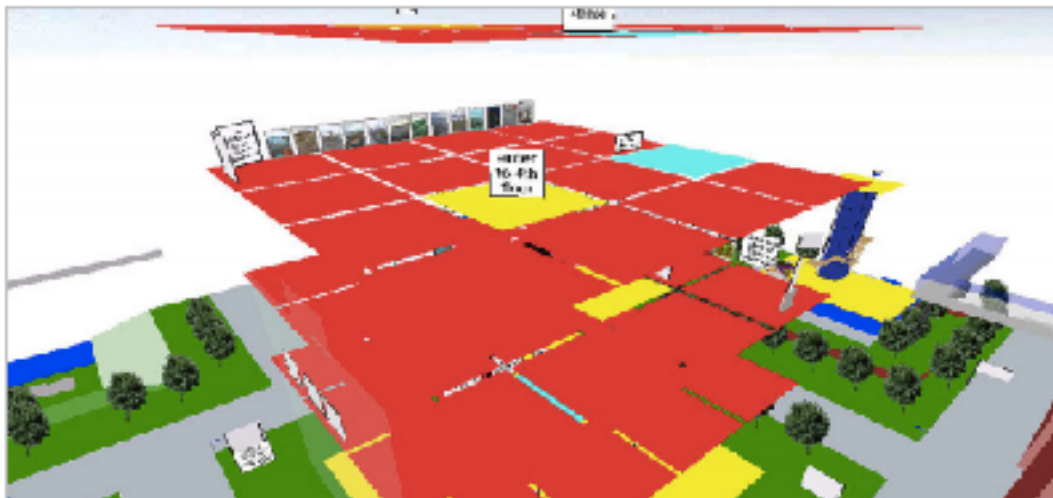
Figure 1: Images of Karlskrona2 discursive interface (above) including screenshot of animation of user-created environment (below). © Rune Nielsen

Karlskrona would be transformed into a virtual environment, in which citizens would adopt avatars, participate in discussion and form new relationships, interests, and collaborations to altering the fabric of their city. (Figure 1)

In this sense, it provides an interesting and particularly utopic specimen of VR's use. Barbara Steiner, a critic and curator who has worked continuously with Superflex, described the intent of the project…:

"…to explore, amongst other things, the effect of the 'virtual' town on the 'real' one and of the 'real' one on the 'virtual' one," asking, "To what extent do virtual decision making processes influence the urban space, that is to say, what consequences does this project have for the residents, to what extent do everyday experiences and reports in the press and media shape the thinking of the users?"[3]

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[3] Steiner, Barbara. "Working within Contradictions." Superflex: Tools. Köln: König, 2003. N. pag. Print.

Superflex had indeed intended for the involvement of the real residents of Karlskrona to a far larger extent. Initially, they had planned to reserve the ability to develop K2 for them, and to mount a large screen displaying K2's activities in the city square. However, the project only ever reached beta stages, Troels Degn Johansson argues on the significance of the work in the book Space Time Play that:

> "Although never fully realized, Karlskrona2 is a testament to the interest taken in contemporary art by a city facing difficulties and change. Karlskrona2 has been threefold canonized: by media scholars studying the development of virtual worlds and their references to places in the physical world, by planners interested in the application of new media to public participation in city planning, and finally by art critics following the strategies pursued by Superflex and other artist working in the field of relational and social art." [4]

An examination of the presentation techniques for the project provides insight into how

artistic   Figure 2: Installation view of Supercity/Karlskrona2/Utrecht2 at the Kunstverein   institutions
had   Wolfsburg. © SUPERFLEX   conceived

of reflecting virtual worlds in physical space at the beginning of the decade, and notably, the measures that Superflex had taken to mediate it. Karlskrona2 bears a marked presence in

[4] Johansson, Troels Degn. "SUPERCITY: Visualizing Values in a Virtualized World." *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism : The next Level*. By Friedrich Von. Borries, Steffen P. Walz, Matthias Böttger, Drew Davidson, Heather Kelley, and Julian Kücklich. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007. N. pag. Print.

Superflex's oeuvre, heavily exposed, discussed, and analyzed in both digital[5] and physical exhibition formats in venues around Europe. The project was even reconfigured for a second incarnation as Wolfsburg2 in 2000, where the concept was implemented for a month in public libraries and the Kunstverein of the city of Wolfsburg, Germany. (Figure 2).

The traces that would have lead to the project - maps, beta simulations, animations, even fictional user accounts and comic strips formed the crux of K2's physical installations. Images of the Casco Gallery (Utrecht) show a modular form of display in which the project's ideas were to be gleaned from a constellation of such artifacts and a computer terminal connected to the beta software platform. Orange walls established a common identity with the graphic design of the project (in which the avatars were pixelated, orange figures) and Superflex's own strategic branding.

Figure 3: Installation view of *What If...* at the Moderna Museet. © SUPERFLEX

Simulating the corporate office environment, with a large white desk surrounded by standard issue plastic chairs facing a PC desktop computer and a mid-sized projection screen, similar display techniques were

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[5] The work is documented on the group's website in its own section, which includes its exposition under Events as an Intranet Seminar in 1999, and the virtual CAVI studio system in 2001.("Activities/Supercity/Karlskrona2/1999.")

used for K2 within the Moderna Museet's What If… show (2000), curated by Maria Lind (2000) (Figure 3) and The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art's Cities on the Move, curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist (2000), whose themes concerned dynamic visualizations of urbanism[6], and architecture.[7] (Figure 3) The relatively uniform appearance of the project across all fronts, almost resembling manufactured outposts of K2's conception, reflect the corporate identity of its author, Superflex, as well as the productive intentions of the project. By adopting a bureaucratic aesthetic, it turned into a stage that made strategies of urban planning the center of its focus, the white IKEA office table and corner plant symbolic of an invitation to join the middle-class in collaborative role-play.

Nicolas Bourriaud, in writing about K2 affirmed that, "local politics are no less 'virtual' in their supposed reality than their electronic counterpart. Only those who believe in metaphysics, that is to say a radical separation between essence and existence, can maintain that the virtual world is a world of illusions. All concrete politics are of the same 'virtual' nature. And Karlskrona2 is a political tool."[8] Indeed, K2's politicians, Superflex themselves, had succeeded largely in exciting optimistic dialogue about the political possibilities of VR in critical discourse at the time, without invoking the criticism it would come to garner within the media as popular entertainment. While the political aspect of many of Superflex's projects are subsumed in a wider conversation about Superflex's identity and motivations, in this case we see that the strict control they maintain over their representation casts a certain ambiguity over the extent to which this project was limited, publicized, or exaggerated through its presentation today, as Superflex seeks to erase the lines between marketing, curation, fact, and fiction. Superflex's approach to globalized politics and corporate identity is analyzed by Johansson as a method of "using art to suspend reality; […] by inducing this suspension they appear to set free a reality level of future and possibility that seemed inconceivable before; a level of reality which also characterizes the cyber age epistemology..."[9] Such a project is

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[6] Gellatly, Andrew. "Cities on the Move." Frieze Magazine. Https://www.frieze.com/issue/review/cities_on_the_move/, Sept. 1999. Web. 20 Apr. 2013.

[7] Moderna Museet. WHAT IF Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design. Moderna Museet. Moderna Museet Stockholm, Sept. 2000. Web. Apr. 2013. <http://www.modernamuseet.se/en/Stockholm/Exhibitions/2000/What-if/>.

[8] Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Make Sure That You Are Seen (Supercritique)." *Factor 2000*. Liverpool [England: Foundation for Art & Creative Technology (FACT), 2003. N. pag. Print.

[9] Johansson, Troels Degn. "The Virtualization of Place: Art, Culture, Technology." Diss. IT University of Copenhagen, n.d. CiteSeerX. Web. 2013. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.195.2974&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

revelatory of the particularly lyrical manner in which Superflex attempts to turn globalization, its own pathology, into a means to inoculate others.

PART 2: VIRTUAL JIHADI, 2008

Now, leaving Superflex in the confines of northern Europe we teleport into the world of New York City's urban sprawl in the year after their exhibition successfully opens at the Moderna Museet, we cut to a scene at 5 am on a Saturday morning. The monitor announces - the Twin Towers are being toppled! The challenge is to run to safety, dodging a rain of debris and fire, helping to save civilians you encounter, screaming in shock.

Now press the clock on your monitor, scroll in an upward motion on your mouse, and fast-forward 6 years. Multi User Domains (MUDs) have evolved from the innocent interface of Superflex's K2 into Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) and Massive Multiplayer Online RolePlaying

Figure 4: Screencaptures of "Quest for Saddam." © Jesse Perilla

Games (MMORPGs). Blizzard Entertainment, 3D game producer, reaches the upper echelons of the Fortune 500. The war on terror rages on the Internet as well as Afghanistan. In the news, a Colorado teenager has programmed a video game called "Quest for Saddam, " in which a soldier runs through a virtual army

Figure 5: Screencaptures of "Night of Bush Capturing" © Gameology

base shooting as many Iraqi soldiers as he can."[10] (Figure 4) The organization Al Qaeda however, have hacked and has rereleased it as a recruitment game called "The Night of Bush Capturing," (Figure 5) in which the soldiers' faces have been re-rendered as George W. Bush. Now pause, go to settings, and re-select your avatar as artist Wafaa Bilal. (b. 1967) As the screen loads, you find yourself sitting in your studio dodging paintballs as a

part of your interactive installation, "Domestic Tension," (2006) in which viewers log onto the Internet and click a button to "Shoot an Iraqi," which fires real paintballs at you. The challenge is to sit at your computer, hacking into the "Night of Bush Capturing" game, while dodging as many user-generated paintballs as you can. You reach 200 points, and a bright yellow spark appears over your head as you succeed in completing the code! You have programmed yourself into the game as a teacher at the Art Institute in Chicago, who has heard that American soldiers have killed your brother in Iraq during a civilian raid. You insert yourself into the game as a character the user recruits as a

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[10] "The simplistic DOS game encourages the player to shoot turban-wearing opponents who may (or may not be) caricatures of Osama bin Laden:"

Zach. "Quest for Bush / Quest for Saddam: Content vs. Context." Rev. of *Petrilla, Jesse. Quest for Saddam. Auburn, CA: Petrilla Entertainment, 2003*. Weblog post. *Gameology*. *Http://www.gameology.org*/, 26 Sept. 2006. Web. 20 Apr. 2013.

suicide bomber. You release the game as an artwork, exhibited at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 2009, and Subversions at Cornerhouse, Manchester in 2011.[11]

Figure 6: Screencaptures of "Virtual Jihadi" © Wafaa Bilal

"Virtual Jihadi" (Figure 6) is based on a game created as an expression of political violence that has nonetheless been modified for use as on propaganda on both sides. This instance in history demonstrates a parallel flexibility in the means of virtual reality and war, which can serve as both passive tool and hypnotic instrument in the hands of its user. With the simple instrumental act of injecting his own subjectivity, family history, and trauma into the game Bilal draws attention to the precarious position the user takes in his position, as he intends "to bring attention to the vulnerability of Iraqi civilians to the travesties of the current war and racist generalizations and stereotypes as exhibited in games such as Quest for Saddam; along with vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups like Al Qaeda because of the U.S.'s failed strategy in securing Iraq."[12]

Bilal's work, often situated on the four-sided battleground of the private, the public, the corporeal, and the virtual, takes his own life as the material for his practice, appropriating the atmosphere potential of virtual reality's as the site of his performance. "Virtual Jihadi" specifically, in

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[11] Wafaa Bilal. *Wafaa Bilal CV*. *Wafaa Bilal*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://wafaabilal.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Wafaa_Bilal_CV_2012-3.pdf>.

[12] Bilal, Wafaa. "Virtual Jihadi." *Wafaa Bilal*. Wafaa Bilal, 2008. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://wafaabilal.com/virtual-jihadi/>.

being a single-player game, takes away the dimension of social participation within the game and

Figure 7: Installation view of "Virtual Jihadi" in *Subversion*, at Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK.
© Ibraaz

creates a situation of psychological isolation, shifting the viewer into a dungeon of reflexivity as he/ she carries out the motions of the game narrative. In relation to performance, this kind of VR work lies in the theoretical auspices of expanded cinema, in which Gene Youngblood sought to include performance art and the Intermedia movement in his seminal 1970s book on the basis that they, "[while] these were rarely illusionist, they were often multimedia, multisensory, and exclusive, conceived as near-totalities." [13]Part of the intention of the project, he maintains, is "to attract people who may never want to engage in a political dialogue about the war, or violence, or civilians, or lack of privacy, and it's working in that sense."[14]

     Bilal defends the controversy of his work, as well as the position he situates the viewer and himself in, saying it is "a piece of fiction that uses the video game format to create alternative narratives and perspectives. Because we inhabit a comfort zone far from the trauma of conflict

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[13] Grau, Oliver. "Intermedia Stages of Virtual Reality in the 21st Century." *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003. N. pag. Print.

[14] Bilal, Wafaa, and Brian Boyko. "Recreational Network Traffic News: Interview with Wafaa Bilal – Lessons about Dehumanization and Technology from a Man Living under the Gun." Interview. Web log post. *Service Assurance Daily*. Ca Technologies, 18 May 2007. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://www.serviceassurancedaily.com/2007/05/recreational-network-traffic-news-interview-with-wafaa-bilal-lessons-about-dehumanization-and-technology-from-a-man-living-under-the-gun/>.

zone, [we] have become desensitized to the violence of war. We are disconnected, disengaged while many others do the suffering." By voluntarily taking on the role of terrorist, Bilal destabilizes the pervasive notions of mass media (the press) through personalized media (software games), and forces his viewer to identify with the "enemy" suicide bomber through the psychological work of recreating his subjectivity. However, the debut exhibition of "Virtual Jihadi" in 2009 at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was shut down for this very subject matter, provoking controversy and anger, and showing how the entertainment value of VR today causes it especially to attract media attention. One of Bilal's colleagues fumed, ' "they would have to ban every Tom Clancy novel or the movie "United 93" because those feature terrorist acts. "This is a massive overreaction," he said. "When a writer or actor plays a role, their beliefs don't have to match," he said, adding that [Rensselaer] administrators should surely know that."[15] This instance shows that VR as a mode of mainstream entertainment at this point in the 2000s, contrary to being able to escape detection as a private means of output, has become an automatic harbinger of public scrutiny, controversy, and criticism.

In another interesting form, outside the reactive environment of the country its politics concern, the project also appears as a part of Subversion, a "unique group show of new and recent contemporary art that brings together the work of eleven artists from across a range of disciplines including animation, video, installation and photography in response to the often histriographic presentation of Arab culture"[16] curated by Omar Kholeif at Cornerhouse, Manchester in 2012. The work was presented as a part of a stage set of a typical Gaza Internet café designed by stage designer Kev Thornton for the exhibition, replete with stained desktops and flickering neon. (Figure 7) The curatorial decision to frame the artwork with such an artificial context is a curatorial statement of "how media is put into the world to be '"tampered with, reauthored and represented."[17] By using false texture of theater to situate the viewer outside of his/her context, within the staged "reality" of a country embroiled in conflict, the curator creates a play on the dynamic between the terms of spectatorship of the work itself and the exhibition. Indeed, it is the condition of the work itself that allow such a liberty of interpretation to be taken, or - in the case of the example preceding it - not.

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[15] Jaschik, Scott. "'Virtual Jihadi' Leaves RPI; Controversy Doesn't." Web log post. *Inside Higher Ed*. Inside Higher Ed, 11 Mar. 2008. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/03/11/rpi>.

[16] Williams, Ben. "Staff Review/ Subversion." Rev. of *Subversion Exhibition*. Web log post. *Cornerhouse*. Greater Manchester Arts Centre Ltd, 2 May 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://www.cornerhouse.org/art/art-news/staff-review-subversion>.

[17]Kholeif, Omar. "Palistinauts and Virtual Jihadi: Arabic Artists Get Subversive." Rev. of *Subversion*. *The Guardian* [Manchester] 13 Apr. 2012, Online ed.: n. pag. *Guardian.co.uk*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2012/apr/13/arabic-artists-subversion-manchester>.

Figure 8: Screencapture View of RMB City circa 2008. © Cao Wei.

Figure 11: Screencapture of interview between China Tracy (Cao Wei) and curator Leesa Fanning. © Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Figure 9: Screencapture View of RMB City official opening circa 2009. © Artforum.

Figure 10: The author takes a tour around RMB City as of April 29, 2013. © Ritz Wu.

PART 3: RMB CITY, 2009

Figure 11: Installation View of RMB City in *Utopia Matters* at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, Germany. © Cao Wei.

Cao Fei's RMB City is a virtual city in the popular online simulation world, Second Life, which invites users to conduct their daily lives in a 3D MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online RolePlaying Game). "Launched in 2008, and open to the public since January 2009, RMB City is "explores the creative relationship between real and virtual space, and is a reflection of China's urban and cultural explosion."[18] It borrows its hybridized landscape from number of large Chinese cities undergoing accelerated urbanization, replete with gleaming glass skyscrapers and apartment complexes dwarfed against the backdrop of gargantuan industrial steel scaffolding and an endless, bright blue sky. (Figure 8) As a comment on the artifice and inaccessibility of such urban planning, in contrast to

Figure 12: Installation View of RMB City in the China Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, Italy. © Cao Wei.

[18] Erdem, Ceren. "RMB City: Spectatorship on the Boundaries of the Virtual and the Real." *Interventions* 2 (2012): n. pag. 12 Jan. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://interventionsjournal.net/2012/01/26/rmb-city-spectatorship-on-the-boundaries-of-the-virtual-and-the-real/>.

Figure 13: Performance photograph of RMB City Opera at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, USA. 2011. © Nelson Atkins Museum of Art

the relative quiet Superflex's Karlskrona2 was able to maintain before VR's "massive" popularization, Wei continually modifies and adds key tourist landmarks of China to her virtual kingdom - statues of Chairman Mao, Tiananmen Square, and the Forbidden Palace. By participating in the economic models set up by the Second Life platform, users insinuate themselves into the constantly evolving work, buying and trading commodities. (Figure 9) RMB City intends to allow Chinese audiences to engage in an imaginative production and reclamation of the mediated symbol of their landscape, as mediated figures themselves.

Chander and Sunder in their argument for the legal validity of fan fiction state, "Reworking the proprietary icons of our age offers a counter economic strategy. Media stereotypes play an important role in educating us about the capacities of others. More sinister yet, they plan an important role in educating us about our own capacities."[19] The question of RMB City's political resonance lies in the how the modes of personal re-appropriation and inscription afforded by VR point at the real, physical and social capabilities of the individual, especially in how they are restricted, overruled, and subverted in Chinese society. Explicitly imposing a strict hierarchical and economical infrastructure in RMB city that reflects its economy as artwork (Ulli Sigg, prominent Swiss

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[19] Chander, Anupam, and Madhavi Sunder. "Everyone's a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of 'Mary Sue' Fan Fiction as Fair Use." *California Law Review* 95.110 (2007): 597-627. Print.

collector, was the first virtual mayor of the city) (Figure 9), the overblown possibilities in the customization of their appearances Wei allows users in juxtaposition to the oppression of the unalterable landscape and government seem to be orchestrated for darkly ironic effect. RMB City is an absurdist ballet of marginalized, alienated, and narcissistic desires in the face of an urban reality spiraling out of control in the wake of capitalist affluence.

Whereas the critique that "technologies are felt also as immersing bodies in specific hierarchies of power and relations of inclusion and exclusion"[20] is usually a wary reminder, Wei renders it in this particular experience of gameplay obvious to the point of discomfort.

The opening of the exhibition of the work at Serpentine Gallery in January 2009 was staged as a virtual vernissage, replete with the avatars of eminent collectors, champagne glasses, and flyers for Hans Ulrich Obrist's appearance at an upcoming biennial. In Artforum critic Brian Droitcour's account of his tour of the "twinkling confection of a digital city,"[21] the writer intertwines the seduction of VR with the glamour of the art world elite. While it is unknown whether the artist had intended to project the hierarchical art world through RMB City's psychological hollowness in this situation, such a moment reveals the poison inherent within the concept. Unbeknownst to the user, VR is not simply a passive environment to be inhabited, but in fact is able to consume back.

Physical exhibitions of RMB City also show how curators and institutions have experimented with reconciling the digital by creating objects and environments that contrast or coincide with the virtual city, somewhat myopically focusing on the digital texture, rather than its urban concerns. For example, in its installation in the exhibition Utopia Matters at Deutsche Guggenheim (curated by Vivien Greene), the work inhabited various personal mobile devices in the theatrical set of an intimate living room, (Figure 11) in sync with the logic of Kholeif's realization of "Virtual Jihadi." Instead of transporting the viewer to the public domain in the midst of conflict and therein staging the conditions for the work's artificiality, however, Greene transports the viewer to the anti-space of conflict, the banal living room, and stages the work as the pixellated node of fascination, vivacity, and controversy in the domestic sphere. As an installation of the Virgin Garden at the Venice Biennale in 2007 (Figure 12), or as a dance performance (RMB City Opera), drawing both from the stiff movement of the avatar and the propaganda operas of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in its

[20] Bernardini, Elena. "Nomadism in Art Practice." *Global and Local Art Histories*. By Celina Jeffery and Gregory Minissale. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2007. N. pag. Print.

[21] Droitcour, Brian. "Virtual Realty." *ArtForum*. Artforum International Magazine, 16 Jan. 2009. Web. 20 Apr. 2013. <http://www.artforum.com/diary/id=21839>.

last major exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (2011) curators have created situations in which sculpture and performance take on the texture of the virtual city as their subject. (Figure 13)

CONCLUSION

In the analysis of the above examples, my argument is that the physical exhibition becomes contaminated with the creative potentiality of the VR world when the dynamics are inverted, and it becomes the physical shadow of its virtual subject. A realm drained of the weight of its object; the white cube exhibiting the work of virtual reality is thrown into sharp contrast, defined by its stark economic and social boundaries. Chained to financial structures, institutions, and its social networks, it suddenly reveals its own limitations in engaging with the virtual economy. In other words, it too becomes a pocket of lack, begging to be filled, disrupted, and inhabited.

Such a crevice of need is also opened, however, as a site of creativity for the curator. If the VR works themselves bestow creative agency on their distanced, globalized audiences, allowing them to personally engage with land-locked politics, institutions must turn to their own creative agency to create the same sense of personal engagement, interpreting the conditions of their own landlocked terms of access and what it may provide as a supplement to the virtual sphere, further than its local art audience and networks of financial and promotional support. This is where the enveloping drama of the stage or theater enters the discussion. As seen in the examples of all above-mentioned physical display of work, the computer terminal is of crucial importance, and the negotiation of its means of access (whether within an internet cafe, in the bedroom, the office, or blankly installed in the gallery) is to the curator's discretion, who is enabled to take on the liberties of stage director to maintain the fiction within the virtual work. The harsh academic realism the exhibition space is subjected to (as a result of modernism's onslaught) may be said to lose its asceticism in the display of virtual political work. In terms of what Alex Farquarson called a movement of "new institutionalism" in curating in 2006, conditions caused by the dual rising trends of globalization and new media have caused institutions to invite into museum and gallery programming "values of fluidity, discursivity, participation and production,"[22] - values also definitive of the bustling interactivity of the virtual salon, reincarnated as the "new institutionalized" gallery. In other words,

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[22] Farquharson, Alex. "Bureaux De Change." *Frieze Magazine* 101 (2006): n. pag.*Http://www.frieze.com/*. 26 Sept. 2006. Web. 20 Apr. 2013.

when virtual margins are legitimized as a self-sufficient platform for political dialogue in art, we see the way in which it increases the fluidity of a feedback loop in which real conflicts produce virtual dialogue in art, and inversely, real changes in art are produced by the politics in virtual dialogue.

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