AHRC ICT Methods Network Event

INTIMACY: ACROSS DIGITAL AND VISCERAL PERFORMANCE

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE, LABAN, THE ALBANY, HOME LONDON AND ONLINE, 7, 8, 9 DECEMBER 2007

Seminar on (*Dis)Embodiment* led by Prof Paul Sermon

Rapporteur's report by Bridget Atkinson

At what point is the performer embodying the virtual performer? And have they therefore become disembodied by doing so? These were the main questions posed by Professor Paul Sermon for discussion in his seminar with reference to the creative/critical discourse in *Second Life* that polarises fundamental existential questions concerning identity, the self, the ego and the (dis)embodied avatar. He has a particular interest in how the mixed first and second Life is interfacing; in building around the physics of *Second Life* and likes very much the notion of what goes wrong in the 'virtual' realm. He spoke about the 'void in the lag' when things slow down; breakdown. He *wants* things to go wrong.

In the tech-free space that was created at the start of the seminar due to problems with the visual equipment, he told about his early beginnings. He comes from a Fine Art background, studying at the University of Wales at Newport in South Wales. He was fortunate to have worked with Professor Roy Ascott, a radical thinker, whose key interest was in the use of computer networks in art. At that time it was very hard to get computers into art schools, but Professor Ascott managed to, somehow. The main ideas that Professor Sermon was working with at the time were those surrounding Roland Barthes and 'The Death of the Author'; where artwork is created in the eyes of the viewer and which provide the ethos behind the thinking in creative collaborative practice. This in turn had been built on the ephemeral art happenings of the late 1970s in which his work truly has its roots.

With the technology re-established, Professor Sermon took us on a telematic artwork journey from the early 1990s. The underlying themes of body and identity; identity and self; disembodied notions of self; Lacan's birth of self and ego identity were all played out in mostly controlled, domestic interfaces using a universal language of rituals and the familiar.

So, where next? *Second Life* of course. Here Professor Sermon has embarked on a journey of discovery concerning the notion of presence and locating the body in intimate environments; on sofas, beds etc. There is a definite orientation towards sensuality in his work and a desire to work with human interaction at that level of intimacy. He sees this work as connecting back to Fluxus and ephemerality of art practice with the internet. He noted that the interesting paradox about *Second Life* is one which surrounds notions of Lacan and the mirror. – in *Second Life* there are no mirrors; it is not possible to make them. And so the screen becomes the mirror accepting the identity of the body. This is what leads Professor to Sermon to think that it is very important for your avatar to project the physical characteristics of your own self. Although he conceded later that the notion of identifying with his own avatar was for his benefit, not for other peoples'. If someone chooses to build a relationship with their avatar who is of a different gender etc, that's fine, but he wouldn't feel comfortable with that.

And this is where the discussion opened up, initially around the role and nature of the avatar. It was asserted that perhaps people with disabilities may want to be able-bodied, rebuilding inner self-confidence that they gain in their second life to take back to 'first' life. While the avatar gives you the ability to see things in different ways, to move beyond narrow categories, an understanding that histories are running concurrently and at different levels can be brought to a 'reality'. Issues surrounding honesty and deceit

were of concern; hardly anyone puts first life information into their profiles; how was an avatar being read by other people? It was conceded that the technology was not advanced enough to address the questions being asked, but it was thought that we deceive people all the time in first life, so why not in second? As for consequences of actions, these are not the same in *Second Life* when talking about ethical concerns and actions. Fundamentally, there are questions about how we view *Second Life:* is it a game? Is it a work of art? Is it an alternative life? Different views are operating by different people at different times. Finally in this vein, it was asked why is there an interest in using this telecom tool and still using a body – a western conception of body at that – in this space we don't need a body. The answer to this was that if there is no body there is no space – the senses within our bodies create the space and this idea is taken over into *Second Life.*

Notions of religion and spirituality then dominated the discussion. It had been put forward that there had been a lot of anxiety in society when printing came on the scene. Maybe the anxiety surrounding other kinds of reality illustrates that we are on the verge of a new shift. In response to these changes people were exploring notions of humanness, looking for an idealistic world – a Utopian view; while engaging less with religion in First World, we are projecting these ideas onto these other worlds. It seems that people are missing something else and in a sense the virtual world is the same as heaven. As humans we are always seeking 'somewhere else' It was asserted that the notion of religion and the role it played in issues involving *Second Life* are important. Not least the role of monotheistic ideas in the conception of body – driving us to ask 'Why is a body significant?' Professor Sermon at this point said that his early work with live action facilitated closer cerebral interaction, but the move to *Second Life* had not been so exciting in this respect as in the live art context.

Religion provides a way of seeing culture *per se*. And the importance of an avatar being like you is that it is related to a cultural value. But at the same time, monotheism challenges what it is to be human; it gives instead a fixed idea about a person which conflicts with the multiplicity of the human condition. Those that are going to embrace a seamless fit between first and second life will be those in cultures who think of life not just in a physical sense, but also in a spiritual, rather than a religious, sense.

Professor Sermon was asked how he saw his work in the future. He talked about using Motioncatcher and bringing it into avatar movements, he had said he wanted to take avatar forward, but paradoxically also liked the clunkiness; developing more experiences with video and *Second Life* - combinations with first and second life realities, how they are interfacing. He is more and more interested in how we are embodied in second life space.