



# aesthetics in action

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# Cyberaesthetics – The Phenomena of Electronic Art

(Sidey Myoo)



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## The Aesthetics of Electronic Worlds

The idea of immateriality was critical to defining cyberspace as an imaginary place. Because it has been considered immaterial, it would be free from the constraints of the physical world. Therefore, it would be possible to create new places and new identities. It would be feasible to lose one's material body and still travel around the world as a body of information.

Adriana de Souza e Silva, *The Invisible Imaginary: Museum*

Spaces, Hybrid Reality and Nanotechnology

### 1. Value as ontological difference: the physical vs. the electronic world

My aim is to draw attention to the values, principally aesthetic, which arise from the ontological difference between the physical and the electronic. This ontological difference can, in itself, be said to have value since it lays the foundation for creating different or even new values, especially in the electronic sphere. First of all, therefore, a brief explanation of this ontological difference and how it affects value is necessary.

A distinction should be made between phenomena occurring in the physical world, usually referred to as 'real', and those occurring in the electronic sphere, which I refer to as electronic reality, and which can also be regarded as real. Any conscious and real human activity (as opposed to simulation, for example) in the form of an intentional act performed in electronic reality – in this case, the creation of a person or an electronic world – carries with it the same obligations as activity in the physical world. This real human engagement can, for example, comprise uploading specific content to create one's own image or space. This must be understood in terms of the ontology of the Web since such phenomena involve the person to an ever greater degree; they expand to a multiplicity of forms, which become increasingly attractive and meaningful, acquiring an aesthetic dimension. One can understand electronic reality in terms of the

aesthetic values connected with beauty, fantasy, imagination, strangeness, and, frequently, 'otherness' in relation to forms found in the physical world.

I therefore posit that online phenomena should be seen not as unreal, but as electronic forms of existence, real states of being created in the electronic world, as a human world transformed, and, finally, as the person him/herself.

## 2. The creative process in electronic reality

What I mean by the aesthetics of electronic reality principally refers to electronic worlds created using 3D graphics together with two processes occurring within them: the creation of a self and the creation of a world. In addition, a number of other components of electronic reality unconnected with electronic worlds created using 3D graphics, such as the aesthetic dimension of social media sites and the visual features of a personal websites, will also be analyzed to some extent.

The basis for these two processes is not only philosophical but also psychological and cultural. The psychological aspect derives from the need to create one's own image and a place on the Web which can be shared with others, but also an environment that provides private, personal space. The cultural basis is connected with the fact that today an electronic presence is a necessity, which is expressed in the colloquial maxim: *If you're not on Google, you don't exist*. The whole point of creation and self-creation is to show oneself as a different, more interesting person in a way that would normally be impossible in the physical world. The potential of the electronic environment is released by the individual's desire for creative engagement, a desire to change or expand oneself and to create a small part of the electronic world.

The ability of developing technologies to satisfy human needs makes it a reasonable supposition that we are in the early stages of a process that will lead to the creation of electronic space as an alternative sphere of existence suffused with human presence. Whether by choice or necessity, people are increasingly communicating with each other by means of an avatar in a graphic 3D environment or a user profile on a social media site. The origins of electronic reality are intimately bound up with technology, and it is also technology that offers the individual new opportunities in electronic reality: the possibility of assuming different forms and modes of existence.

For the past three decades, I have been fascinated with the construction of identity and how it affects culture: the symbiotic relationship between the real and the virtual, and how identity reacts and shifts when processed through manipulated time.<sup>1</sup>

I wish to focus on such phenomena as the experience of the new, which allows one to observe changes both in one's own identity and in the electronic environment around oneself. It can be seen as a sort of game that one plays, principally with oneself, in which one draws out and presents to others certain meaningful content which lies within oneself but remains concealed in the physical world. An example of this is Facebook, where personal stories occasionally appear presenting a picture somewhat at variance with what is known about an individual in the physical world. Some profiles on Facebook reflect how a person would like to see themselves and their relationships with others, and how they would like to be perceived, both in terms of physical appearance and personal qualities. Despite the plethora of websites where such phenomena arise, it is my view that the most appropriate environment for creation and self-creation is an electronic 3D world such as Second Life, where I have been active since 2007.

### 3. The person as avatar: who would you like to be here?

Those entering an electronic 3D world normally do so in the form of an avatar, capable of constant transformation. The creation of an avatar involves self-creation, which in turn might prompt the asking of certain questions as one observes this new representation of oneself and the relationships formed by means of it. This is a new kind of experience, a place in which you can choose your own identity.

Self-creation can release the desire for physicalization: the creation of an avatar as the fulfillment of how one would ideally wish to look according to one's own aesthetic canon. This might involve gender-switching, which, while fundamentally a question of physical appearance, may also reveal a need for embodiment in a different gender as part of the communicative process. Another possibility offered by self-creation is to take on a fantasy form, either as a communicative statement or simply for fun. Below are just a few examples of forms used by acquaintances and students at Academia Electronica-Institute of Philosophy UJ, in Second Life.

Aspects such as appearance, an interest in alternative forms of communication, and the desire for various kinds of participation may result in

fairly deep engagement in the electronic world because they contain values which can become so important that one makes the choice to function in an electronic community and an electronic world. If this form of being brings satisfaction, we will want to choose it and be continually involved in it, and it will constantly occupy our thoughts.

One might also compare oneself in both realities and transfer experiences from the electronic to the physical world: for example, outward appearance in the electronic world can have a positive effect on a person in the physical world. This is an aesthetic-social approach to oneself; changing one's appearance in the form of an avatar can change the attitude of others. The transformation of a person's appearance in the electronic world is a very particular phenomenon in that once a person undergoes this experience, they can expect an immediate evaluation from the online community, which may lead to further modifications. This process of change may lead to constant experimentation with one's appearance based on the evaluation of others as well as one's own feelings. The electronic world makes it possible for changes to be instant, momentary or experimental, but they can also initiate other processes which, where possible, extend to the physical world. In several cases, I have observed how the kind of transformation a person undergoes as a result of their involvement in Second Life can also cause a transformation of their "biological avatar" – usually for the better.

There you discover the trendy inhabitants (actors, singers, models, producers) who look like some new race, a result of successful mutation: unbelievably beautiful skin and faces; fixed smiles; and bodies whose perfect shapes surely can't be the result of human evolution.<sup>2</sup>

Now would be an opportune moment to explain what we mean by a person's aesthetic dimension: how they manage their appearance through the often profound creation of an avatar. Even if their self-creation in the electronic world initially amounts to little more than a game, it is quite possible that a person will begin to derive pleasure from showing others their electronic form, joining a community of other electronic figures, being perceived in this way over a period of time, and forming relationships. They could also become so bonded to and identified with their avatar that losing it could impair their perception of reality as generally understood.

The spectral body in the virtual realm is kinesthetically linked as well to the felt body. That is why a virtual persona can be violated and why there is a relation between cyberdeath and psychic annihilation.<sup>3</sup>

Another aspect is the flow of time. One can form a certain attachment to the electronic world because of the possibilities it offers to manipulate one's appearance, for example, to look younger than one's years. The usual practice in the electronic world is not to discuss such matters as who you are or where you come from in the physical world: *life in electronic reality is lived without reference to the physical world*. I am reminded of the case of a Californian man of advanced years who in Second Life was a young man in his early twenties. There he owned a house, sold objects he made himself, and had a girlfriend. In our conversations he often remarked that thanks to his electronic manifestation and the ideal space he had created for himself, life had become so much better. His experiences took place among friends in an atmosphere of love; life there was good, at times even better than in the physical world. Age had ceased to have any meaning since the convention in Second Life is that you are your avatar. For this man, time in the electronic world had, in effect, stopped, or even been reversed; in the physical world, however, biological processes were taking their course. One day, he appeared to have logged into Second Life, but it turned out to be his sister. He had passed away the previous night, having given her his password so that she could inform us in the event of his death. The time he had spent as an avatar in his ideal world had made him very happy in his final years – and isn't that what matters?

#### 4. The immaterial world – where would you like to spend your time?

The ontological difference between the electronic and physical world mentioned earlier means that one can experience pleasure spending time in one's favorite place in the electronic world. What makes graphic 3D creation different from, say, creating a personal website or a profile on a social media site is the possibility of creating (within technological limits) a complete environment, a world to live in.

In this sense, a WWW website is two-dimensional. Even if it allows some scope for creativity through interactivity, one could not create an environment but merely something like a motif: a photograph, a clip of music, some graphics or a piece of text. This type of expression generally



results from the user's interest in certain content, making it a kind of *passive exposure*, but not a place, somewhere where one can be constantly logged in. Moreover, this kind of information does not require the participation of the person themselves; it is, rather, an objectified representation of the person.

A social media site is more appropriate for daily, extended participation (sometimes lasting several hours), enabling the user to upload their own content, but it is still not a place, merely an interactive profile; not an all-encompassing environment, but intriguing nonetheless for its variability and potential for acquiring a massive contact base. One might wish to follow other users, view pages or be continuously active oneself, reporting one's experiences in the physical world or imaginatively describing how life could be. Although social media sites can be very enticing with a high degree of immersion, they are mainly about communication, regardless of the content. I call this kind of participation *active exposure*, in which one is enveloped by a plethora of information in various forms.

The situation changes entirely with an avatar, which, through its appearance, behavior and speech, represents a person in their interactions with others and with the electronic world. Here one operates in a complete world, encounters personal places and communicates with one's intimates. Having entered it, one moves and immerses oneself in the created world of electronic space. This is *engaged participation*, which is no longer about uploading content, but being a person; it is about total online involvement with one's own created persona and the environment in which it exists. *Engaged participation* is not about receiving information on the surface of the screen, but spending time in electronic space, to which the screen is the gateway.

Finally, by "user-created," we mean that everything within Second Life is given form and substance by its Residents. And this is where the SL avatar is unique, for in most online worlds, reality is part and parcel a conception of the company that created it.<sup>4</sup>

The most important element in a 3D electronic world is the avatar/person. The space here is predominantly personal space, which, in the absence of its owner (the avatar) is empty. Here the focus is on the person themselves, not just information about the person or merely being in a personal or shared place, often with no specific end.

It should be added that the creative process in a 3D environment can give rise to new values that do not exist in the physical world, something I

have witnessed several times in different places when wandering through Second Life. This is particularly true of places set up as works of art, which one can stroll through. I have in mind a place in Second Life called *Immersiva*, created by Bryn Oh.<sup>5</sup> It is an island in Second Life, a place created as one enormous work of electronic art. This exquisitely created space, in which one can be teleported to different surroundings in different climates, makes it possible to experience this work of electronic art in all its variety, in terms of structure, traditional concepts of art appreciation (for example, atmospheric or romantic visual effect), or the use of graphic animation and color. It is also of significance that the forms emerging from electronic matter could not exist in the physical world.

It should also be noted that these items created in the electronic world are generally of considerable value, particularly to their creators; I am not referring to financial value, but the value derived from creating something oneself and the feeling of satisfaction and pride this engenders. Anyone possessing property such as a garden, building or animal (bot) will want to show it to others. I was once involved in a situation in Second Life concerning the removal of an area of land which contained items created by a number of people. These items were of such value to them that they petitioned the Second Life administrators to temporarily reinstate the land to allow them to recover their creations, which the administrators agreed to.

## 5. The interface as the gateway to another world – do you like your computer?

It always amazes me that people transfer so much of their activity to the Internet, even in matters important to their professional and personal lives. Why do we spend so many hours clicking a mouse? My view is that regardless of the possibilities that the Internet offers, there is a need for new experiences and some relief from the monotony of life, and the Internet offers solutions not previously available. In the physical world, the effort most people put into their everyday activities is disproportionately large compared with time spent on relaxation, entertainment and their emotional lives. Occupation and culture inform the logistics of life to such an extent that the default premise is to regard any activity outside work or in some way beyond the norm as being difficult to comprehend or make part of our lives; life becomes predictable, at times automatic, and difficult to change, perhaps because we do not know what or how to change. At this point, the

Internet becomes a part of our lives, and with it an interest in other people and places. Searching and self-expression become pleasurable, not least for their sheer novelty; add to this the ease of access to places created in electronic reality and the fact that no special effort is required, merely the straightforward use of a computer. Moreover, what happens on the Web usually fulfills a genuine need, and emotions expressed and encountered there can be very real.

Returning to the ontological difference between electronic and physical reality, I would argue that it releases powers of creation and self-creation in the individual. Mediation into the electronic world is not like taking one's seat in an auditorium to watch a performance or a film, but, rather, having the opportunity to exist in electronic space, and, if one so desires, in a way different from in the physical world. I have frequently observed expressive avatars in Second Life, looked at profiles on Facebook or taken part in forums for PC gamers. I have no doubt that in most cases the content involved was different from what these people experienced in the physical world; in this way, they were creating part of their everyday life.

Similarly, the user of a virtual world tries to click on whatever is in front of him; if the objects do not respond, he is disappointed. In the virtual universe, Descartes' maxim can be rewritten as follows: "I can be clicked on, therefore I exist".<sup>6</sup>

Never before have people been able to enrich their lives in the way modern technology allows. It could even be said that the possibilities of creation and self-creation available today are a kind of therapy to counteract the flow of time, enabling changes which can bring new opportunities. What matters is not that in creating a self and a place in the electronic world we function on the same principles as in the physical world, but that we see the experience as real and having value. It is a way of comparing and creating values and making changes and re-evaluations through which we understand the otherness and multifarious forms of the electronic world.

If new technologies continue to offer increased scope for creation and self-creation in the electronic world, our online activity may become more significant to us than what we do in the physical world; for some, perhaps, it already has.

## Endnotes

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Alice in Wonderland



Robot



Dragon



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