

# Border Art

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena



*'The function of any boundary or filter [...] is to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal.'* (Lotman, 1990: 140)

This article will attempt to filter (interpret?) for you a performance and installation in Second Life.

The event was 'a realtime

interpretive and site-specific performance' based on and for the opening of JC Fremont's installation on borders: 'Imaging Place SL: U.S./Mexico Border'. Second Front conceived and performed a wild experience on Friday 5th Jan at Ars Virtua (Gallery 2). But before I relay to you what happened, I want to delve into the artwork. Remember, I'm in charge of this framing text, this portal to memories and place, and I am crafting a very specific path through it.

## **Zone One: Borders in 'Imaging Place SL: U.S./Mexico Border'**

'Imaging Place SL: U.S./Mexico Border' is a two-part art work: there is a large border object and an audio piece with 360 pictorial nodes. The former is a replication of part of the border between the U.S. and Mexico at Sao Paulo Castelinho. It is wall with wire coils and looming spotlights, a set that makes you feel like performing some kind of border experience. The irony is that it facilitates play, having fun (to me). Like a child pretending to ride a nuclear bomb, it is an urge that drowns out social conscious issues but then acts them out in the process of play.

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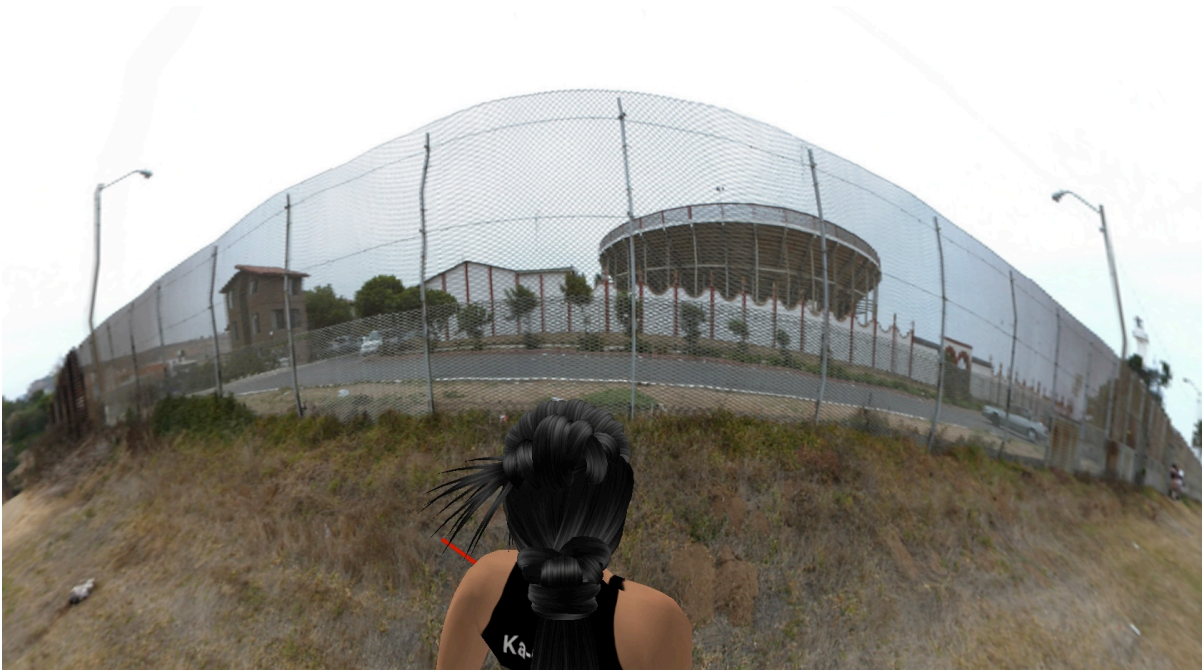


Parallel to this is the visual/audio work that features imagery from Sao Paulo Castelinho with accompanying audio narrations by JC Fremont. The installation is in the same style of Fremont's previous works ([reviewed here](#)): aerial maps on the ground with long red lines that guide you to floating balls you enter. Once inside the balls you are surrounded with a 360 degree panoramic view of images from the border, and a voice-over narration is triggered. The narrator, Fremont, tells us stories of his childhood from the area. For instance, how when he was eleven his family took trips over the border and he used to steal horseshit cigarettes. Or stories from the perspective of his adult self: detail about Borderfield Park, a place that used to be Friendship Park, before they built a fence right through it; of the hundreds of bodies buried nearby. Speaking of bodies, lets now talk about the opening event performance.

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## Zone Two: Borders in Second Front's Performance

Second Front, apparently the first dedicated performance art group in SL, were asked by the curator of Ars Virtua, Rubaiyat Shatner, to create an event for the opening. At 7pm on Friday 5th Jan (SL time) the guests at the opening were suddenly alerted to a flaming avatar: Man Michinaga. Michinaga hovered above us all, relaying surveillance to Border Patrol. Suddenly, Border Patrol officers, wearing military vehicles, plonked into the already very busy gallery space. With this simple act, suddenly Fremont's border wall and the actors cast the guests as illegal border jumpers.

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(Photo by Dell Wilberg)

Barricades then dropped down from sky, piling up and around us, and then refugee tents. All this happened whilst there were Border Patrol officers shouting at us. I loved that my avatar seemed to be hooked to a helicopter (Wirxli) who walked around and took me across the border. Because nothing was said this may have been by accident, but the active involvement of my avatar in the performance was exciting. I was being taken for a ride and the vehicle was my avatar, rather than some swaying fiberglass horse.

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Then, surrounded by these military vehicles, officers, barricades and tents, Tran Spire shouted: "RED ROVER! RED ROVER! BRING THE DETAINEES OVER AND MOW THEM DOWN!". I loved this because it was an extreme moment where the performance of a serious situation shifted, for me, into the ridiculous and so freed me to be outside of it. Then, pretty soon, the place went up in flames. They threatened to nuke the whole place. And then...

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There was a bright shining light and the entire gallery was covered by a box. The majority of the guests were thrown outside. They hovered above the gallery, bewildered.

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(Photo by Dell Wilberg)

Some of us managed to stay inside and some slowly floated down. We walked around the wreckage, wondering what happened. Is this the end?

*"...electronic closure occurs when a work's structure, though not its plot, is understood. This closure involves a cognitive activity at one remove from the usual pleasures of hearing a story.... There is no emotional release or perception of fittingness, just a sense of going from the unknown to the known. This is very different from and far less pleasurable than our more traditional expectations of closure, as arising from the plot of the story and marking the end point of an action." (Murray 1997, 174)*

How did the event end for me? I crashed. So, the event hasn't ended for me. I did not understand the work's structure at that stage. I'll tell you why. The following is how I experienced the performance at the time, not like the previous section, which was produced with research and the benefit of hindsight.

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## Zone Three: Borders between Performance and Griefing

Actually, I didn't think that the helicopter was an actor at first, and the expulsion of everyone part of the performance. In a world where anyone can dress as whatever they want, I initially thought that the helicopter was just another guest. I also thought the sudden appearance of a large box that ejected everyone was a griefer (person who causes grief, a disturbance, intentionally).

When asked about it the artists were oblivious to the possible interpretation of aspects of the experience as being grieving. It is interesting that the artists assumed that everything that happened would be read as being from them. I don't think you can make such assumptions in an environment where grieving is somewhat commonplace. Is the artist therefore responsible for ensuring their work is easily distinguishable? Does that mean that any artwork that resembles a grieving cannot be enacted? What does mean that grieving and art share the same characteristics?

The problem is that art which seeks to inflict an experience of loss of control and abstracted violence is pedestrian in a virtual world that, albeit unintentionally, perpetrates such performances or crimes everyday. Artists brandishing fur brushes and thumping on a tin lid are thrust aside by database administrators yielding 'bugs'.

## Zone Four: Borders between the SL Art Experience and First Life Art Experience

As I have [considered before](#), art in SL and a virtual world cannot be executed or experienced in the same manner as our first life. An example of the discontinuity (or emergence of a new form of experience) is the avatar representation of ourselves in the art space. When in a gallery or at a performance purely in our first life, we can have some control over our expression. Our body expresses how we are feeling or what we are thinking. In a virtual world we have to script that expression. But when experiencing a piece of art we are usually quite immersed, putting all our concentration into that experience. To script a reaction feels like a performance. Indeed, I'm not saying that people who experience art in real life do not perform their experience of it, but what I find interesting in pieces of artwork like Fremont's, is that I immediately feel terribly over-dressed and that I am acting inappropriately. For instance, this image is of a grandmother crying because she is seeing her grand-daughter for the first time through the border fence. And there I am (Lythe is), suddenly present in their world thanks to Fremont's 360 nodes, with my bling and pretty smile. This doesn't happen for me at so-called 'real-life' galleries. I don't think I should be in sandals in front of the last supper. I do in Second Life because my avatar is part of the artwork. The border of the artwork is not defined by the artist, indeed, by its edges inworld, it is defined by the edges of my computer monitor. And everything on that monitor becomes part of the artwork, as far as my eye is concerned.

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## Zone Five: Border between Second Life and First Life

Here (below) you can see Lythe 'immersed' in the photo of the U.S./Mexico border while beside her is a virtual plantation home. The home is a neighbour of the gallery. What are the differences between the construction of a virtual world environment and a flesh world one? What are the similarities? The wire fence and pixels are perhaps equally as flimsy, but each are made solid by the equally ironic gravity of association.

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The borders featured in this article are, like all borders, an artificial creation. Slide along them, get caught in the barbed wire, contest them, burn them or construct you own...

*'Imaging Place SL: the U.S./Mexico Border' will be at Gallery 2 of Ars Virtua for a short period and then will be relocated.*

**Arv Virtua Gallery:** <http://www.arsvirtua.com/>

**JC Fremont/John Craig Freeman:** [http://pages.emerson.edu/faculty/j/john\\_craig\\_freeman/](http://pages.emerson.edu/faculty/j/john_craig_freeman/)

**Imaging Place SL:**

[http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john\\_craig\\_freeman/imaging\\_place/imaging-placeSL/index.html](http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john_craig_freeman/imaging_place/imaging-placeSL/index.html)

**Second Front:** <http://www.slfront.blogspot.com/>

**Second Front report on this event:**

<http://slfront.blogspot.com/2007/01/second-fronts-ars-virtua-performance.html>

**Second Front members:**

Wirxli Flimflam aka. Jeremy Owen Turner (Canada): <http://www.wirxliflimflam.blogspot.com/>

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[http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com\\_mycontent&task=view&id=136&Itemid=41](http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_mycontent&task=view&id=136&Itemid=41)

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Tea Chenille aka. Tanya Skuce (Canada): [www.myspace.com/exskuces](http://www.myspace.com/exskuces)

Man Michinaga aka. Patrick Lichty (USA): [www.voyd.com/voyd](http://www.voyd.com/voyd)

Alise Iborg Zhaoying aka. Penny Leong Browne (Canada): <http://www.simulex.com/>

Tran Spire aka. Doug Jarvis (Canada): <http://www.transpiresl.blogspot.com/>

Great Escape aka. Scott Kildall (USA): <http://www.kildall.com/>

Lizsolo Mathilde aka. Liz Pickard (Canada): <http://www.lizsolo.com/>

Gazira Babeli aka. CLASSIFIED (Italy): <http://www.gazirababeli.com/>

## References in Article

Lotman, Y. (1990) *Universe of the Mind*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Murray, J. (2000 [1997]) *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

## Photos

All photos in this article taken by Lythe Witte, unless otherwise stated.

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