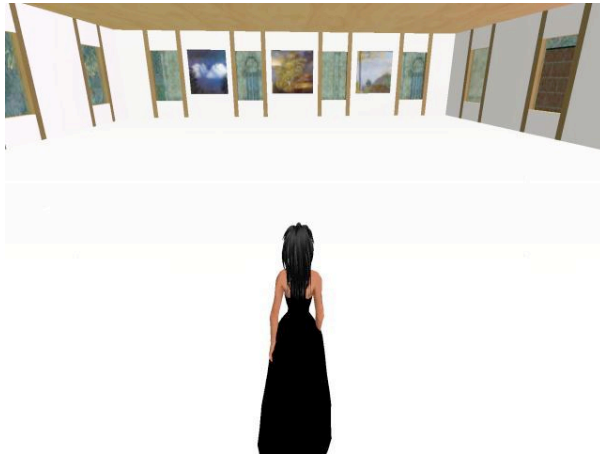


The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena



Some love the smell of the interior of a new car and some don't. The journalistic engine — made up of writers, subjects, readers and publishers — seems to be addicted to that smell. Dust is so ugly. iPods are so sexy. Old media is so wrinkly. Second Life is so taunt. Because of this 'new' fetish the 'world first' rhetoric pervades despite its inaccuracy and the

exclusion of unpopular topics renders reports incomplete. But there is without doubt something sublime about being part of a birth. I have never witnessed nor given birth in the human sense, but I do get butterflies in my stomach at the thought of being part of a revolution or evolution. For many, Second Life provides just that experience. In SL it is not the role of the producers to create objects or activities, instead, it is up to the residents to mould the translucent clay Linden Lab has provided in the form of space and scripts. What are the residents of SL creating, and are they creating anything new? This is a question I ask continually in light of my urge to understand what is specific about the virtual world medium and Second Life community. For today, I want to explore the experience of art in SL. What art spaces are being created, and have we found what is unique to the experience of art in a virtual world?

I'll begin by bursting the first bubble. At present, most of what is created in SL mimics the world as we know it. This can be seen in most of the marketing and advertising campaigns, employment opportunities, educational programs, economic ecosystem and relationships in SL. This is a completely normal process of adaptation, where residents become comfortable in the new environment (software) by invoking the familiar. Academics Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin eloquently explained in their 1999 book a process that is very similar: what they term 'remediation'. Fundamentally, remediation is the representation of one medium in another.

Dena, C. (2006) [‘The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one’](http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=40), *SLATE: Second Life Arts & Total Entertainment Magazine*, issue 2, Sept [Online] Available at: http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=40

The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena

'Digital visual media can be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media.' (15)

Among the detailed exposition Bolter and Grusin provide is their description of the different types of remediation. I frame them here as four stages of a continuum: transparency; translucency; refashioning and absorption. These types or stages, it should be noted, can be applied to just about anybody's assimilation of something new. Also, this process happens on an individual level. So, it is not the case that SL will develop through these stages as if maturing since newcomers will most probably be working through the same process individually. The different ways of remediating, of assimilating the new, will always co-exist therefore. What is good about SL is that it can facilitate that diversity of experience. It doesn't need a one-size fits all system of missions and activities. So, back to the types or stages of remediation. I'll employ these as a handy framework to describe the ways in which the art space in SL is moving from mickery to uniqueness. However, before I do that I need to clarify what is the 'old' art space.

The pivotal theory of the ideal art space is Brian Doherty's notion of the gallery space as a 'white cube'. In 1976 Brian Doherty published a collection of essays in ArtForum that discussed the nature of an art gallery and how to best display an artwork. The ideal gallery, he explained, eliminates all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art". The way this is achieved is through the creation of a space that is analogous to 'white cube'. He explains it in his essay 'Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space' thus:

'The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life." The discreet desk may be the only piece of furniture.' ([Society of Control](#))

Dena, C. (2006) ['The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one'](#), *SLATE: Second Life Arts & Total Entertainment Magazine*, issue 2, Sept [Online] Available at: http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=40

The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena

So this is how we will measure the degree of development in art spaces in SL. Now, lets see how much current SL art spaces replicate, improve and hybridise the 'white cube' aesthetic.

Stage/Type 1: New Medium is Transparent

Bolter and Grusin describe this first type of remediation as 'where the older medium is highlighted and represented in digital form without apparent irony or critique' (p.45). The new medium (SL) tries to be a transparent portal to the older medium. They cite digitised pictures and downloadable documents as examples. SL gallery spaces that exhibit (pardon the pun) these qualities abound. Many of the spaces I looked at directly mimic the gallery space as we know it. My first example is one I couldn't resist opening with. It is the *Second Life Museum of Art* ([SLurl](#)), which I should note was in the process of construction when I visited. It is obviously an almost exact replica of the white cube aesthetic of an art space (see also the pic at the head of this article):



Lythe Witte at the *Second Life Museum of Art*

I find this museum interesting because it persists the 'painted' white walls (and floors in this case) but has windows. Doherty explained that windows are usually sealed off in galleries so that the outside world doesn't come in, doesn't interfere with the experience. What outside world can come in to a virtual gallery? Although an outside is virtually represented with images of building you see in the screenshot, there are no disturbing sounds like car hoons to irritate. What could intrude in virtual space? Well, residents who aim to annoy, griefers, for one. Another is the location.

Dena, C. (2006) '[The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one](#)', *SLATE: Second Life Arts & Total Entertainment Magazine*, issue 2, Sept [Online] Available at: http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=40

The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena

As far as I am aware there are no planning bodies in SL, so anyone can build whatever they want anywhere. You could have a cosy beach house on an island one day and a huge mall one metre from you the next, with no avenue for recourse. For instance, this is the very busy neighbourhood of the Nate Bergman's *Bolinas Museum of Art* ([SLurl](#)):



A busy outside world at Bolinas Museum of Art

What of the real world? How could the real world intrude in a virtual gallery space? Well, for one, you are not necessarily left alone to experience an artwork in a virtual world. You look the same regardless of the virtual location you visit: in real life you're sitting at your computer. This means that your spouse or family may not understand that you're contemplating or experiencing art and so won't interfere with questions about adding paper towels to the shopping list. A computer at a desk isn't a sacred space, yet.

Another example for this type of remediation is from *Ars Virtua* at the New Media Center ([SLurl](#)). It is not exactly without irony but is a direct remediation of the gallery space. See the "discreet desk" representing "the only piece of furniture"?

The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena



The "discreet desk" at Ars Virtua, New Media Center

Two: New Medium is Translucent

With this type the new medium 'seeks to remain faithful to the older medium's character' but 'the electronic version is offered as an improvement' (p.46). In my cursory analysis it seems the majority of SL art spaces are at this stage of remediation. A case in point is Random Calliope's *Crescent Moon Museum* ([SLurl](#)) [[Anya Ixchell covered a special game in this space](#)]. Observe the correlation between the image of the Louvre in 1833 with a screenshot of the museum:



Samuel F. B. Morse's Exhibition Gallery at the Louvre (1833)

from Brian Doherty's essay 'Inside the White Cube'; image sourced from [Society of Control](#)

The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena



Random Calliope's Crescent Moon Museum

The virtual world version of this space is better for the artists and for the patrons because virtual patrons are not restricted by gravity. A patron can simply fly up and view a picture directly, and zoom in quite close. This is an improvement...on the real world where paintings high up are difficult to see. Another example of how the virtual art space improves is the lack of affect from weather. There are many outside art spaces, that nevertheless mimic outdoor exhibitions, but do not have to fear damaging the works. Horus Baker's *Art of Nature Gallery* ([SLurl](#)) is one and *Nova Open Air Sculpture* ([SLurl](#)) is another:



Nova Open Air Sculpture

Three: Refashioning

In this type of remediation the new medium tries to 'refashion the older medium or media entirely, while still marking the presence of the older media' (p.46). This co-presence creates a kind of 'multiplicity', a 'collage' of two states. It is at this point we

Dena, C. (2006) ['The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one'](#), *SLATE: Second Life Arts & Total Entertainment Magazine*, issue 2, Sept [Online] Available at: http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=40

The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one

By Lythe Witte/Christy Dena

start to see the creative seedling burst through the surface of what has been. [Chip Poutine reviews](#) Lordfly Digeridoo's *Public Art Museum* ([SLurl](#)) from an architectural perspective and claims that it is an inspiring mix of both replication of the real world with virtual world specific qualities:

'The Museum does indeed provide a healthy jab of classicist and beaux-arts elements in a manner that attempts to impart a sense of importance and permanence to the museum as an important cultural institution. The manner in which these elements are employed, however, is where the build begins to depart from the logic and limitations to which these conventions are normally subject in the real world.' ([Virtual Suburbia](#))

Indeed, in the Feb 12 issue of [Metaverse Messenger](#), Horus Baker's article 'Architecture as Art in SL' explores the moves towards creating structures in SL that are artworks themselves [[pdf](#)]

The fourth type — where the new completely absorbs the old, where Second Life offers new ideas for an art space — is explored in [part two](#) of this series...

References

Brian O'Doherty's 'Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space', Society of Control [Online] Available at:

<http://www.societyofcontrol.com/whitecube/insidewc.htm>

Brian O'Doherty (and Thomas McEvilley) (1999) [Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space](#), University of California Press, Expanded edition

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) [Remediation: Understanding New Media](#), MIT Press, Massachusetts.

Dena, C. (2006) ['The White Cube of the Virtual World Art Space, part one'](#), *SLATE: Second Life Arts & Total Entertainment Magazine*, issue 2, Sept [Online] Available at:
http://www.slatenight.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=40