SFMOMA – THE ART OF PARTICIPATION 1950 – NOW



Life Squared [link], our installation in the online world Second Life, is currently part of the exhibition The Art of Participation 1950 – Now at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Life Squared – web link and gallery link.

More links – Linden Lab/Second Life and Wired magazine



The exhibition, curated by Rudolf Frieling, is a bold and inspiring collection of works of conceptual, performance and media arts. It tracks the theme of participation in contemporary art.

(Conventional artwork – on a wall in a gallery, to be contemplated. Interactive art – the museum visitor presses a button and something happens to the artwork. Participatory art – the involvement of the visitor/viewer/audience/witness is a key component of the work of the artist).

There is a catalogue from Thames and Hudson to accompany the show – good essays from Rudolf and Lev Manovich – [Link to Amazon]

Interview with Rudolf – [Link]

John Cage's notorious 4'33" – the pianist sits for four minutes and 33 seconds and plays no notes. This is not about silence, but about musical interval and ambient noise that actually constitutes music – the gaps between the notes and the environmental noise against which a conventional musical composition stands out. 4'33" directed the audience's attention to the figure-ground relationships at the heart of music. (See my evolving notes on "figure and ground" – [Link])

Other notable works for me in the exhibition include Janet Cardiff's "Telephone Call" – an immersive itinerary through the museum taken by a visitor with a

camcorder prepared by Cardiff – literally a soundtrack, together with screened imagery, on the viewfinder. The visitor experiences the mismatch between what is before them and what is represented to them in the staging of Janet Cardiff's absence from the walk she makes with them round SFMOMA.

Ant Farm – a series of related works from 1971 – "Media Van" 1971 – nomadic truckitecture as Ant Farm made their way across the US in a Chevy van, staging lectures and events along the way; "Citizens Time Capsule" 1975-2000 – burying a 1968 Oldsmobile Vistacruiser with a collection of community-donated artifacts in up-state New York; culminating now in "Ant Farm Media Van v.08" – a 1972 Chevy C10 van converted again into a time capsule, this time containing analog and digital media, some from the original 1971 roadtrip, others, in the form of digital photos and music, donated by museum visitors to SFMOMA.



Rejecting a naturalistic aesthetic – extruding 3D from 2D (old photographs)

"Life Squared", our work with Lynn Hershman Leeson, a major contemporary artist working in the Bay Area, is an installation in the online world Second Life. We have regenerated a work of hers in the Dante Hotel, San Francisco, 1972 on the basis of the records of the work, what remains of it and its locale. This is a project in what Henry Lowood and I call "Archive 3.0 – animating the archive". Henry is a curator in Stanford Libraries and one of the world's leading experts on new gaming technologies.

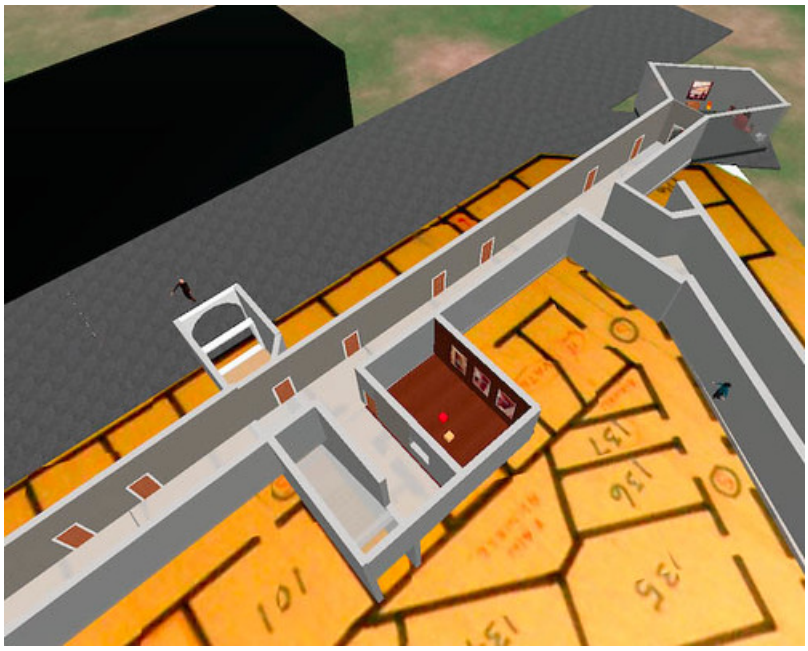
For me, it had started back in 2004 with the Presence Project. Lynn Hershman is one

of the artists working with the project to explore and research liveness and mediation, presence and absence in new media and the arts. Lynn's work, as part of a distinctive current in contemporary art, has been a consistent address to questions of how our identities and senses of self are so dispersed in our prosthetic world through all sorts of material forms and mediations: clothes, lifestyles, financial and legal information, imagery, medical history, personal memory …

From Henry I found out that Stanford had acquired 90 odd boxes of her archive: papers, photos, videos, reviews. Lynn didn't want it all to sit in the Special Collections in the library and molder. She did indeed want to animate her archive.

This was music to my ears. And so began the project Life Squared, an archaeology of a work of Lynn's – the installation made with Eleanor Coppola in a room in the Dante Hotel. In 2006 our team from Stanford Humanities Lab reworked the fragmentary remains of this event, experience, and performance as a facility and encounter in the online world Second Life.

Key members, other than Lynn and the SHL leadership, were Jeff Aldrich, Henrik Bennetsen, and Henry Segerman.



I said Lynn's aspiration to animate her archive was music to my ears. Precisely because I am an archaeologist, fascinated by what's left of the past, its presence with us now, and what we do with it. An aside: many think that archaeologists

discover the past. They don’t. They work on what remains. Archaeology is another kind of memory practice, where past is turned into present. We are all archaeologists now – [Link].

One site where such work happens is the museum or archive. With Henry, I see us moving into a new archival era. Because we live in Silicon Valley, we thought this should be called Archive 3.0 – [Link].

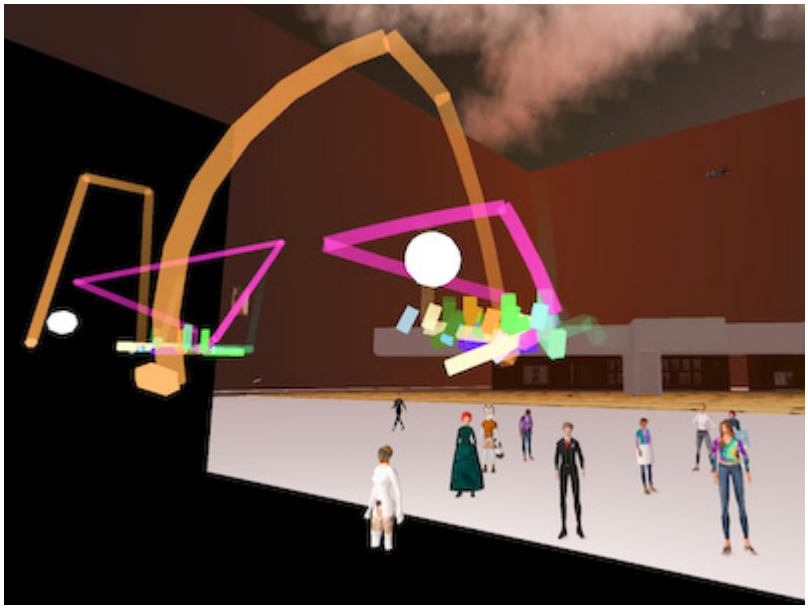
Archive 3.0 – new prosthetic architectures for the production and sharing of archival resources – the animated archive.

What is involved in bringing archives alive? What are signs of this shift?

Remix, rich engagement, co-creative regeneration

These signs are there in in the reterritorialization of information resources associated with a variety of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 initiatives like Wikipedia and Flickr, with new institutional efforts of libraries and museums to diversify and reach out to users with vast information resources and intelligent customizable search facilities like Google Books. Clear in the vast and growing heritage industry of museums and sites for us to visit is a reemphasis on personal affective engagement with cultural memory. There is a recognition of the importance of developing rich modes of engagement with archival, historical and cultural resources. New interfaces involve processes of recollection, regeneration, reworking, remixing in sophisticated visualizations and customized interactive and participatory experiences. We visit Colonial Williamsburg or Jorvik Viking Center in the UK and the past speaks to us.

The Life Squared project, to animate part of the Hershman archive in the online world Second Life, is an address to the question of the future of the library and museum in the context associated with Archive 3.0 – when collections are no longer primarily of books on shelves, paintings on walls, objects in vitrines, but include immaterial forms, intangible experiences, mixed analog and digital forms. When collections are dynamically sensitive to the interests of audience, viewers, those engage with art works, and when curation becomes co-creation of new works through remixing of the components of collections and archives as they are given over to much more open access.



Avatar radars – tracking their movements and interactions

Life Squared has been a very rewarding experience, working with Lynn, truly collaborative, participatory – have a look at the documentation in our wiki and blog – [link].

See also various talks and links – [menu]

SFMOMA is changing its agenda, or rather augmenting the primary focus upon its collections Accompanying the exhibition is the inauguration of "D-Space" – a new facility in the museum and a program to reach out to the community. Dominic Willsdon has joined from Tate Modern, London, where he pioneered outreach through institutional alliances, between museums and cognate institutions, to share art-work, the work of cultural production associated with the world of the artist, art collector and museum. Dominic has precipitated an experiment involving SFMOMA, Stanford University and California College of the Arts (CCA) – developing a hybrid learning experience in the arts. It started with the idea of a kind of "summer school" for a diverse and permeable student and community group working with artists in and beyond the space of the museum. This term, Fall 2008, Peggy Phelan of Stanford and Brian Conley of CCA have been sharing a class between their institutions and devoted to the ways artists have treated their work as an educational or pedagogical project (think of Joseph Beuys's political agenda).

With Jeffrey Schnapp , my co-director of Stanford Humanities Lab, I have outlined how such initiatives can be part of a radically new practice-oriented curriculum

for arts and humanities education in the North American university. We started with our experience of practice/project/performance based research and teaching in Stanford Humanities Lab and my own Metamedia Lab in Stanford Archaeology Center.

Link – Artereality – rethinking art as craft in a knowledge economy

In the broadest way I see all this as a shift from a primarily custodial model for the art museum to a coproductive or cocreative model of designing and making culture. Conventionally, artworks are to be cherished and curated, their qualities and achievement to be broadcast in art museums, colleges and universities.

But we are also increasingly witnessing the vitality and power of popular participation and cultural creation, enabled by information technology, its ubiquity and low cost. All those videos on YouTube, all the blogs worldwide, all the self-publishing on the web.

Participation and co-creation, user-generated content – and a deep recognition of the creative energies inherent in even the most mundane of everyday experiences.

BUT …

You will have perhaps guessed that something like this was coming …

There is a colossal irony and contradiction at the heart of this exhibition devoted to participation in contemporary art.

Above all else, the exhibition celebrates the names of the artists that are attached to the works on show.

In spite of their essential presence to this exhibition, the other “participants” in this art are quite absent. They are at best the supplement to the artists. Let me explain.

There are no names, other than “artists”. Well, perhaps half a dozen.

There are not even any demographic categories. Who are the “participants”? Are they working class, African-American, middle-class, minority? At best we have “the public”, “people”, “audience”. Yet again, and it wearies me to point it out, we are

presented with the crowd, the mass, as material for the artist to manipulate. Robert Atkins, in his essay in the catalog, comes across as an elitist critic sneering at popular “mass” culture, while telling us about participation in the arts (try page 63).

Felix Gonzalez-Torres has us picking up rather unexceptional monochrome posters, beautifully stacked, as our act of participation in his work. Jonah Brucker-Cohen and Mike Bennett, in an award winning artwork, have us bumped off an email list because we are one too many – [Link].

Who does all this enlighten? The catalogue does its utmost to connect Gonzales-Torres to reciprocity (the power of giving – Marcel Mauss’s great idea, though not cited here) and to trauma (Aids). Brucker-Cohen and Bennett are, we are told, reflecting on the dot com crash a few years back.

Do we really have to have this pointed out? Is it convincing? Who benefits from these associations?

We can easily and appropriately appreciate an artist’s critique of the anonymity of contemporary anomie. It might be called consciousness raising. Artists can be good at this kind of thing. Making us look critically at the way we live.

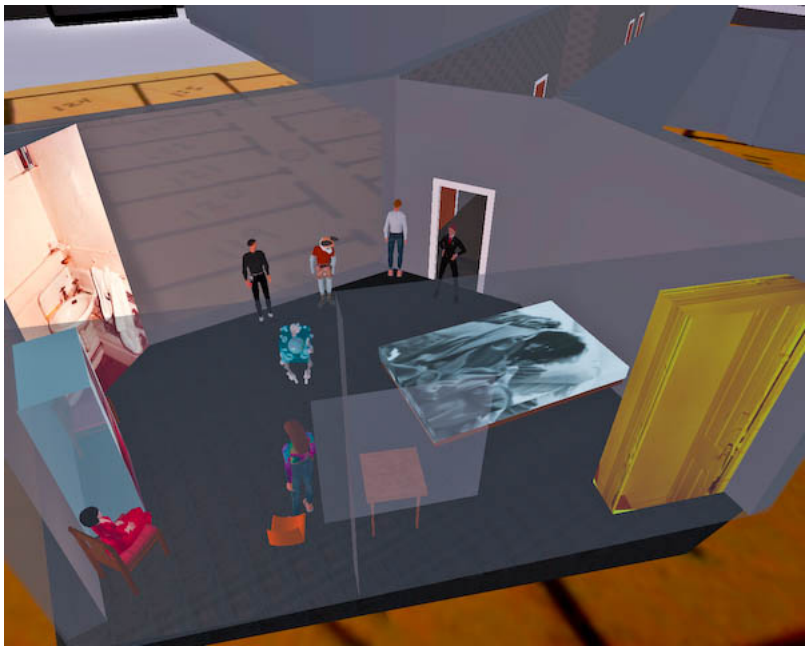
But this exhibition, for me, is so much more for the benefit of “the artists”, or rather their collecting patrons. Why? Because the kudos for dreaming up so-called participatory artwork is awarded entirely to the genius of the artists. They are the ones who dreamed all this up, we are told. There are no other names here, no real people.

The exhibition has the gall to claim that contemporary participatory culture has been anticipated by such a bunch of artists (main website – [Link]).

I am not a geek, but count many among my friends, living, as my family does, in Silicon Valley. It was their gorgeous engineering that brought about the participatory and cocreative web, Web 2.0 – and tied most often to utopian hope and vision.

Such vital hope and vision is NOT present in most of these works. They are much more gestural, incidental, even parasitic upon the work of others. Like Fred

Turner, we can indeed trace the fascinating connections between the arts, new technology and libertarian political ideologies. Fred precisely tracks the subtle networks of association. We can indeed connect art and popular creativity and politics. But the connection is not one of inspired artistic geniuses precipitating cultural and political change (see Fred's superbly nuanced research and beautifully written work on counter-culture and cyber-culture – [Link]).



And just stand back a couple of steps and consider where participation started. Participatory art, Web 2.0 and all the rest we hear so much of today are current manifestations of a long genealogy of participatory creative production stretching back millennia. Palaeolithic cave art and the medieval cathedrals of Europe were all about participation. No, more than this, I hold that it is the everyday actions of ordinary people that reproduce society as we know it, its highest achievements included. Innovation is far more than thinking up new ideas. New ideas are commonplace.

This exhibition seems to say that we need an elite to show and tell us what is actually at the heart of our everyday experience. At the heart of politics. Actually, most of us, who haven't invested in this hype, don't need this self-appointed elite.

Just ask – who does it benefit to hold that these are prescient singular individuals, these artists?

I am actually not really criticizing many of the artists, but rather the art world, the discourse, the business, the market, those who buy art for their collections. Have a look at the new edition of Howard Becker's classic book "Art Worlds" – [Link].

I am a great supporter of contemporary art. I believe that creativity needs to be at the heart of our schools and colleges. Shared, and yes, participatory. I actually have a place in this exhibition. But I am feeling alienated and excluded. I do wonder then about the reaction of those who have no investment in this kind of work.

The art market needs "artists" because they are the supposed source of value – individual genius and creativity manifested in a distinctive body of work that is given significance by the way art historians and critics write the work into the history of art.

So what about those other than the moneyed collectors wishing to enhance the status of the artist in whose individual genius they have invested? I suggest the exhibition is as much a betrayal of the radical libertarian intention of some of the works on show, as it is a celebration of participation in the arts.

The great moneyed and institutional interests of the Italian renaissance reinvented the Graeco-Roman figure of the *vates* – the inspired artistic genius – the creative individual. The institutionalization of modern art has pursued this elitist individualism with fervor, because it fuels the investment prices of an art market.

Just what has changed since the days of the banking Medicis and the Borgias?