

Second Life, First Love

On the movie BRB, questions to Miri Segal Yael Bergstein



Translation: *Iris Domany*

- Y.B.** Let's start with a description of the work BRB, from your latest exhibition "Just a Second, Life" at Dvir Gallery.
- M.S.** The film BRB documents my journey, along with Iris Domany, in the new world of Second Life. The film relates to questions concerning the nature of life, the nature of images, and the relationship between the two.

Second Life (SL) is one of several internet based virtual worlds which have sprung out of cyberpunk culture, and which have been particularly influenced by Neal Stephenson's novel "Snow Crash" (1992). SL is a kind of game with no specific goal.

The participants (Residents) design their own virtual body (Avatar), travel within the world, meet other Residents, create and trade items (virtual property) and socialize. SL's spaces and objects are almost exclusively designed by the players themselves. Actually, SL is a universe of collective creation. It differs from our first life in that it is not (yet) run by huge corporations: every object could be traced back to its original creator, so it is a kind of intimate and anonymous cooperation.

The installation at Dvir Gallery included the film (30 minute long), a virtual gallery which I've constructed up in the sky of Second Life, and a still image of a self portrait inside the game.

The virtual gallery was screened LIVE into the real life gallery, and both exhibitions opened simultaneously, so the spectators at Dvir could peep on the avatars that gathered in the virtual gallery.

BRB (Be Right Back), which resembles an animation movie, was shot entirely inside SL and brings forth elements of our journey through the new continent (or more accurately: archipelago).

Our experiences and conversations were shot using a virtual in-world camera and the footage was then recorded onto the computer by independent software. We designed our Avatars based upon our real-life appearances, but I sometimes appeared with Google's search page as a mask on my face, and Iris showed up in a Queen Esther costume on one occasion.

The film opens with conversation shown on a black screen, registered at a philosophers gathering place. There is a girl there who tries to disclose some of her personal problems. The philosophers however try to

generalize from her words and extract universal meaning, and tension rises. Someone asks her: *"what happened lately that got you so annoyed?"* to which she replies: *"the truth is, that I am sick of the fakeness of this place"*. A philosopher wonders, half quoting Baudrillard: *"Do you think that the more our image is projected into this type of space, the less vital the representation becomes?"* she explains that she came to SL in search of things missing in her Real Life (RL). The conversation goes on to address body-images, the masks we wear in SL and RL, and the differences in communication within those two worlds. Later on, one player comments that SL is just another screen upon which we cast the shadow of our self, and Muzza (the name I chose for my character) points out that strangely enough the graphics do not allow shadows or mirror reflections. Someone says that she appreciates the non-flesh manner which leads us to get right to the_core of our 'selves' The conversation continues. The first woman keeps complaining about life in SL, until one player asks her: *"Have you experienced a recent loss in RL?"* "Yes", she says, *"I had to part from persons and certainties in my life, but let that not interrupt the discussion"*. One Philosopher answers: *"well, loss is huge, loss is omnipresent, even here it follows us, but maybe now we can restore ourselves in new modalities"*

At this point the movie screen is no longer black, and the philosophers gathering place, around a campfire at night-time, is revealed. The journey begins from here, passing through various places we arrived at, sometimes by chance, by using the game's search engine. For instance, when searching for "Love" we arrived at a public orgies space, where Iris met a young guy and had sex with him, while I filmed. The film shifts between those places, the Philosophers' campfire and the virtual gallery I constructed, capturing the conversations as they take place.



- Y.B.** How do you explain the medium in your works, and your interest in images?
- M.S.** The medium of my works is the *projection*; not the video itself, but the projected image. The projector resembles the eye: an optical double cone (the Euclidian model) and a lens in its center, but the light's direction is reversed. Instead of light coming from the outside and forming a retinal image inside the eye, the light comes from inside the device, projecting the inner image onto the outside world. The same type of reversal occurs with psychological projection: "he hates me" replaces "I hate him". The Solipsistic approach – stating that everything in the external world is merely a projection of one's own perceptions – suggests that projection has a blinding potential, but it is also responsible for our ability to sympathize ("I know you are in pain when you hit your elbow"). To me, this is the mechanism that establishes Fantasy – from the projector to the screen and from the screen to the structure of passion – and establishes the manner in which images live inside us.
- Y.B.** Some of your previous works forced the spectator into a specific viewing position: sitting, standing, moving, etc. *BRB*, however, is a direct projection unto a screen.
- M.S.** In previous works I tried to raise awareness to the projected image as such, at times attempting to make the image physically present. In some works like "*Still life in cucumber season*" (2003), and "*unun too easy to ease*" (2001), a synaesthesia of sight and *touch* occurred. *BRB* was my first direct projection, and in the beginning of the process it felt a bit uncomfortable.

In the classic understanding of sculpture, the viewer is a neutral eye floating in space. However when video works first came out in the 70's, their basic assumption was the contrary: the viewer had a body, and this body was placed in the exhibition space in relation to the image or sculpture.

The first Video works set out to amplify the viewer's awareness to her own body, and to the circumstances of seeing art, to the extent that at times the works were embarrassing for the viewer, the work and its viewing became politicized.

In my own works, in a strange way, almost the opposite happens in respect to the body. In "*Place de la bonne heure*" (2005), for instance,

the viewer - a single viewer in the gallery space - sits on a rotating chair with a projector attached to its top, right above the viewer's head. The viewer revolves together with the image. He surrenders his body, and in return sees things through my eyes.

The image travels around all four walls, disintegrated from the architecture of the room. Viewing the film while rotating turns out to be quite physical and it imposes upon the viewer the awareness that the image is a sheer projection. The work deals with political projection – of a circus or a square, for instance – onto the public sphere. The two circuses which appear in the work, one in Tel Aviv – "The Beautiful Hours" circus - and the other in Kalandia Checkpoint on the way to Ramallah, - have both been artificially and inorganically planted in the public space, forced upon it. The film travels between them.

The video ends with an image of a horseback rider shooting the sun and exploding it. The projection then stops, and the chair comes to a halt. The image of the sun bursting transfers from the screen and affects the reality in the gallery.

Second Life itself seemed to me to be the ultimate arena of Projection, and so additional sculptural elements seemed redundant. You don't bring any of your RL physical presence into SL – neither looks, nor voice, nor smell, but still SL *is* a visual space in which the body has a representation: you can sit in silence with someone, for example, and the silence can be meaningful, unlike in a Chat Room.

Roaming in SL is like wandering inside the collective sub-conscious: when I "speak" with someone there are no nuances of tone or facial expression, I can not raise one brow in irony and so forth. As a result, an amplified interpretation of what is said is occurring - a projection;

It is up to me to decide how to understand what happens, and the objective reality barely limits me. Naturally, I bring my own sub-conscious and mood into those interpretations.

When somebody "speaks" in the game his avatar is seen typing, a mechanical ticking sound is heard, and his words appear as text on the screen. The speech is *read* by the eyes, and this strengthens the feeling that the conversation is taking place inside my head. This may be what causes the players to approach what is said as they would approach an idea that comes to mind, even if it's a bad idea.

Freud claimed that there is no indecision in a dream: if two options are considered, they shall both appear one after or in parallel to the other. In the same fashion, conflicts and arguments are differently structured in SL.

The conversations are fast, and as the sub-conscious is more active, the emotions that the conversations evoke are amplified.

The *mirror reflection* and the *shadow* are the classical elements from which images came to being, and they are also the fundamental figures in representing the subconscious. Although neither the mirror nor the shadow exists in the game, there is a strong sensation of being inside the sub-conscious. The world may be flat, shiny and with no inner shadowing, like a true "*second degree*", but somehow that is what draws you in.

The mirror reflection idea was also dealt with in the virtual gallery. It was projected into the RL gallery through a mirror, and so seemed to appear on an imaginary plane, "behind" Dvir Gallery's walls. Also, the virtual gallery itself was designed as a double structure, with two sides, each acting as the reflector of the other, and so all the objects were "mirrored", but the avatars were not. In a conversation about my work, Irada Kimchi said that vampires do not reflect in a mirror because the image has no image.

Y.B. What was the shown in the virtual gallery?

M.S. The exhibition in the virtual gallery is titled "*No Matter, What?*". The gallery was built in the air, 300 meters above the ground in the middle of nowhere, and it compliments the philosophers gathering place, which also exists in detachment of its surroundings, and holds discussions about the death of god in an already abandoned universe. The virtual exhibition deals with Non-Matter, with the death of the images shown there, and with the death existing within life; one of the pieces features a 3D image of the written word *TIME*, and when the viewer gets closer he sees that it's made out of a texture composed of dead flies flying (*Time Flies*). Other works include a magnification of my *Escape* keyboard button, an auto portrait titled *Necrofleur* and two still images from *Place de la bonne heure*, showing the sun being shot at, and exploding.

Y.B. What can you tell us about the appearance of the avatars in the film?
They all look glittery, synthetic.

M.S. *BRB*'s atmosphere is that of the purgatory. The avatars seem ghostly, but also sensual and arousing. There are two sex scenes in the film, featuring the illusive seductiveness of the virtual body: on the one hand ideal, forever young, glamorous, but on the other hand dead – unaffected by time. It is a sort of flickering death, a death indicating life.

Miri Segal, "Just a Second, Life", Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, April 19th –
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