Chapter 7
Found Objects, Bought Selves

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ABSTRACT
This chapter traces a process of creating using found object collage, through collecting/consuming practices and finally to the notion of the bought self, avatar representation through consumerist artistic practice in Second Life (SL) the online, user generated, virtual environment. Positioning collage as a reinvigorated current in art, the text couples this mode of making with shopping as found object. Collaboration is inherent in an online virtual world, where programmers, designers and other content providers determine the parameters of what is possible. Found object/shopping is a synergistic fit with the nature of predetermined boundaries coupled with late-stage capitalism. This mode of self-making encourages the idea of buying identification through the construction of an avatar. Through a review of the practices of the Situationists, an aesthetic turn in political tactics is revealed through contemporary art making. The text uses the author’s own virtual/material practice as a case study for the theories explored.

INTRODUCTION
Making art with and within the virtual environment of Second Life (SL) is akin to getting lost in a particularly tortuous, geographic uncanny valley with next to no signposts towards an easy exit. It often aspires to be a reflection of the material world; but not quite. Digitised verisimilitude can be unsettling, but along with the unease comes frequent drama, absurdity and happenstance—in short, the artistically fruitful. This chapter will trace a process of creating in SL from found object collage, through collecting/consuming practices and finally to the notion of the bought self, avatar representation in virtual worlds through consumerist artistic practice.

The following is both an academic analysis and a case study about found object collage coupled with consumerist practices of self-making. In keeping with these ambitions, the chapter utilizes alternating voices. It is my hope that these two different registers will help to both distill, and at the same time, open up meaning. A scholarly analysis of these methods is juxtaposed with poetic contemplation to more fully evoke the potential of ambiguity for introducing spaces of wonder and meaning.

This text uses the author’s own virtual/material practice as a case study of the theories explored. Art making is a delicate blend of many elements, and though the reader of this chapter will hopefully be able to use the observations and analysis

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described within the text for their own work, it is ultimately the author’s singular practice that is used to elucidate the enfolded ideas and reflections.

BACKGROUND

The artist is one for whom the poverty of his or her materials is all that remains in this unveiling of things. It is an inner creative seeing that regathers the things of the world. (Whitehead, 2003, p. 6)

The above quote from artist/writer Derek H. Whitehead encapsulates two fundamental ways of making art, which can be used concurrently or individually. One method, the *unveiling of things* is a subtractive strategy—chip away at the marble, exposing the form that has always existed within. The other *regathers the things of the world*. This additive method—collage/assemblage—builds images and sculpture from diverse sources, materials and sensibilities in a collecting, sifting, choosing and bonding process. Far from simply being a way to make, and similarly to all artistic methods, it has immediate portent for the way a work of art functions in the world as an object, silent witness and/or instigation.

Found object collage/assemblage is a well-established artistic strategy, both in the material and the virtual environments, lending itself particularly well to pop cultural inclinations towards art making in SL. This text examines a practice of found object collage in the all too human world of SL where reality masquerades in drag, exaggerating the vagaries of life. SL, indeed any virtual environment, imposes a collaborative creativity in that the programmers and developers along with other content generators of the space define much of what you can or cannot do within that environment. Found object collage, within this default collaborative experience, challenges artists’ methodological apparatuses, along with disturbing material, dimensional, and temporal assumptions within this pre-determined framework. The happened-upon and the imperfect becomes fodder for innovation and subversion.

Theorist, Clive Edwards says of collecting that it is “frequently associated with antiquarianism and connoisseurship of artifacts” but then goes on to add, “as often [it is] related to assemblage and accumulation” (2009, p. 38). A necessary first, thereafter iterative step to any method of collage is collecting, a term loaded with cultural and psychological baggage. With the relative ease of virtual accumulation—one never has to rent expensive self-storage lockers and moving vans—the good and the bad of collecting practices can be enacted in simulated worlds and become fodder for art production.

Not surprisingly, the notions of what a *consumer* is and what it means to *consume* are contested. Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang suggest in their book *The Unmanageable Consumer* that the “consumer…[has] assumed centre-stage in academic debates…[in] rarely value-neutral” discussions and that consumerism is “recognized [as] the spirit of our age” (2006, p. 1). The jump from collecting practices to consumerism in this text follows the logic of our era, variously known as neo-, post- or late-capitalism. Decades of artists’ projects, critiques and celebrations have legitimized shopping within a fine art context (Grunenberg & Hollein, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 2002). The virtual world of SL, with its mimetic economy, personifies the material world’s fetishes. The role of the avatar in online culture intensifies a long-standing scrutiny of the notion of personal identity, a narcissistically inclined exploration that has gone on “since the origins of Western philosophy” (Olson, 2010, para 1). The extensive use of digitally based avatars in virtual worlds fuels an interrogation of subjectivity at the heart of many arts, humanities and social sciences conversations. Questions of Self and Other, an ongoing concern for much theoretical work (Cadava,