Chapter 4

Digital Steps of Protest, Reenactment, and Networked Interaction: Joseph DeLappe’s Salt Satyagraha Project

Natasha Alexandria Chuk
School of Visual Arts, USA

ABSTRACT

Joseph DeLappe is an American digital media artist whose creative work demonstrates unique intersections between analogue and digital creative processes. In 2008 he created the Salt Satyagraha project, a virtual and simultaneously physical reenactment of Mahatma Gandhi’s 1930 Salt Satyagraha political march by using Second Life (SL) and a customized treadmill that corresponded to his avatar’s movements. The project also included a blog, an exhibition, and numerous screenshots documenting the virtual events. This chapter explores the artist’s intent and the impact of combining virtual and digital labor, performance, artistic intervention, play, and the role of the human agent in the human-computer relationship. DeLappe’s project blog and two key philosophical theories – Walter Benjamin’s concept of the spielraum, a playspace that allows for creative experimentation in advanced technologies; and Jacques Derrida’s concept of the supplement, something added to an original that reinforces or changes its meaning – are used to frame this examination.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2008, through his Salt Satyagraha project, American media artist Joseph DeLappe (b. 1963) recreated aspects of Mahatma Gandhi’s historic march, the Salt Satyagraha, a trek made across India in 1930 in protest of British tax on salt. Some of the details of the original event were honored in his reenactment, such as the distance traveled and the time it took to complete, while others were modified. The 3D virtual environment of Second Life (SL) and Eyebeam Art and Technology Center, a gallery in New York City, were the physical and virtual sites for the reenactment. Deploying a customized manual treadmill outfitted for cyber travel, DeLappe spent 26 days traversing

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the distance of the 240-mile march simultaneously in the physical space of the gallery and the online space of SL. In addition to this, he maintained a personal blog detailing his activities and progress; collected screenshots of his and other avatars and posted them to his blog and Flickr, a photo sharing website; and displayed enlarged and printed 3D reproductions of his avatar in the gallery. Visitors to the gallery could watch DeLappe on the treadmill and the display of his virtual counterpart in SL projected onto the wall as he marched. They could also choose to locate and follow DeLappe’s avatar, MGandhi Chakrabarti, as visitors to SL from their home computers.

DeLappe’s Salt Satyagraha Project was a multiplatform undertaking that engaged historical reenactment and reframing at its center and also explored notions of experimentation, a balance of risk and control, and the creation of media objects that acted as supplements to physical or virtual experience. Considering the variety of media used to complete this project, this chapter addresses a number of issues concerned with the role of the artist and the historical figure in a virtual reenactment, questions of the human-technology relationship, and the impact of combining facets of digital media art and networked environments with analogue and material performance. The latter point is addressed with the aid of a brief comparison to another major SL reenactment project by artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes. Finally, my analysis of DeLappe’s project relies on his written accounts on his blog of his experiences in SL during the Salt Satyagraha project, and my own experiences observing his reenactment on two occasions at the New York City-based gallery where the work was generated and completed.

STAGING A REENACTMENT IN SL

As a reenactment, Joseph DeLappe’s Salt Satyagraha project revealed more about the ways that virtual space can be navigated than it explained the motivations and implications of Gandhi’s politics. Commonly referred to as the Salt March, Gandhi led the act of civil disobedience in 1930 in protest of the British tax on salt. According to Geoffrey Ashe (1998), this tax gave full control of the production or sale of salt in India to the British government. Violation of this law was a criminal offense (p. 301). Homer A. Jack (1956) adds that the use of salt was vital to Indian life, and under ordinary circumstances it was readily available for free (p. 235). This and other unfair mandates imposed by British rule compelled unsettled citizens to respond through proposals for negotiations by groups like the Indian independent movement, of which Mahatma Gandhi was the preeminent leader. On March 12, 1930, Gandhi led a group from Sabermanti and arrived on April 5, 1930 to
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