Chapter 6
Appearance, Absence, Art:
The Objet A-avatar

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ABSTRACT
This chapter suggests a model for reconceiving avatar in terms of desire and loss to reassess their role within creative practices and the construction of digital subjectivity. This focuses on the avatar as appearance, as a negotiation of presence and absence, and as a tool for critical art practice in Second Life. By placing the avatar as Lacan’s objet petit a, the lost object cause of desire, the structure of the visual and cognitive gaze applies Žižek’s concept of parallax to digital embodiment, reformulating a subjective position between physical and digital modes of being. Taking into account the position of the observer amidst the fluidity of contemporary identity, the manipulation of the structures of desire and control can create new experiences that alter our relation to presence and absence in the critical and creative mediation of avatars and its implications for embodiment as a function of consciousness.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter will provide a reassessment of the avatar form, beyond the material construction of embodiment, towards a psychological formation of the subject between physical and digital identities. The emergence of such a view from the inclusion of a representation of the subject within its own gaze will show the nature of the avatar as an always-already lost body, in turn demonstrating the loss inherent to all forms of embodiment. The relation to desire will be extrapolated into the construction of the self as an image and the implications for such developments on creative processes in Second Life. The relationship between presence and absence will be interrogated in virtual environments, and suggesting between the various possible embodiments of the subject a presence-of-absence. These structures of desire for presence will bring in issues of control in the formation of subjective expression before a discussion of the role of avatars in art as substance and gesture. The simultaneous position of avatars as an object and action will challenge the view of embodiment and negation in disembodiment towards a constructive antagonism between the two. Applying the analysis to art practice avatars within SL (Second Life), and taking into consider-
The relation to the technologies themselves, a new critical perspective will emerge at a distance to the bodily form of the avatar in confronting the psychological position of the subject between physical and digital realities.

The primary theoretical basis for this chapter will be Jacques Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the lost object cause of desire. Unlike in objective-driven uses of the avatar in computer games, which will be considered alongside the relation of the avatar to digital culture in general and art practice in particular, this is not a specific object to be desired and attained, but the inherently lost force within the psychological construction of the subject that formulates the nature of specific desires, therefore shaping the entire appearance of subjective reality. This ‘reality’ is Lacan’s elusive Real – the inaccessible truth of the subject extrapolated in this chapter as the presupposed conditions of the unconscious lost beneath the symbolic virtuality of the cogito. The Lacanian analysis will be expanded by Slavoj Žižek’s conception of parallax in which epistemological shifts by the subject have ontological effects in the world it is observing. This is the construction of the Real within the subject: a lost position, absence or void from which the world is seen but cannot itself be included in the gaze.

Within this framework, the theory of Gilles Deleuze and the philosophy of quantum physics will offer contrasting positions on the dissolution of identity and matter that will inform the virtualising processes in place in the construction and creative use of avatars. This will move beyond psychoanalysis to critique the role of art in relation to therapeutic aims and disruptions of faciality in deterritorialising identities; and beyond the science fiction often associated with the relation between humanity and its extension through avatars to re-examine the inclusion of the observer in the observation as the avatar form visible on screen. The notion of superposition, the mode of being in two contradictory states at once, will also be utilised to confront the irresolvable states of being physically and digitally embodied, linking the discussion back to Žižek’s parallax in forming a new position in the sustained antagonism between different visual and cognitive perspectives.

The chapter will draw conclusions on the construction, critique and creative potential of the avatar as a lost object. Rather than negating the artistic relevance of the avatar under notions of a disembodied fantasy in free realms of the imagination, the exploitation of loss will be shown as a necessary step towards confronting the subject with its own position regarding the self, the gaze and subjective reality between physical and digital modes of being. The process of traversing the fantasy of an identified state will be suggested as a critical potential of art in SL for the inclusion of the subject in the creative gesture and in order that a position can be established from which to think otherwise about our relation to any bodied form and its place in a given reality.

**APPEARANCE**

**Gaze and Self**

The construction of an avatar through which to interact with a digital environment is also the construction of an alternative position from which the gaze is made manifest, an alternative self from which to view a given world. This gaze engages not only the visual view of the screen in relation to the physical user, but a cognitive view through the screen into an engaged position within the digital reality of a virtual environment. Lacan (1977) identifies, within the construction of the self, a severed construct of “the eye and the gaze… the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field” (p. 73). This inherent split, of the self in the gaze, “marking the pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen” (Lacan, 1977, p. 74), is described by Žižek (2009) as the parallax stain: the inclusion of the