Chapter 10

“Follow Me, Comrades in Flight, into the Depths!”
Body-Related Performance Art in Second Life

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ABSTRACT
The chapter discusses the changes the body has been subjected to in the 21st century and especially when it enters the digital worlds. The starting point for the reflection of the body today is its floating position in contemporary mixed and augmented reality. By deploying the notions of ‘body image’ and ‘body schema,’ elaborated by French phenomenologist M. Merleau-Ponty, various features of digital embodiment are discussed. After discussing several forms of the techno-modelled body (also mentioning the issue of life addressed in it), the chapter turns to the examples of body-related performance art in the virtual world of Second Life that explicitly raise questions about the body in the digital world, and within Second Life in particular (the examples discussed are: Synthetic Performances and I know that it’s all a state of mind by 0100101110101101.ORG, Come to Heaven by Gazira Babeli and ZeroG SkyDancers by DanCoyote, etc.).

INTRODUCTION
In 1977 the space probe Voyager 1 was launched into space and a decade later flew past the most distant planets in our solar system. In August 2012, Voyager 1 entered the interstellar space, the region between stars, filled with material ejected by the death of nearby stars millions of years ago. Being currently (in November 2014 when this chapter was finished) more than 130 AU (astronomical units, i.e. the distance between the Sun and the Earth) away, it is the farthest human-made object from Earth. It is still sending scientific information about its surroundings through the Deep Space Network, or DSN. After exploring the giant planets of our outer solar system, their moons, and magnetic fields, the mission was extended into the outermost edge of the Sun’s domain and beyond (Jet Propulsion Laboratory, 2014). Anyway, Voyager is slowly approaching one of its ends: in
2025–2030 it is expected that the space probe will no longer be able to power the instruments. But this does not mean that Voyager will disappear; it will wander further into the Milky Way, nobody knows for how long. For our understanding of time, it will travel forever. Being turned into a kind of “space debris,” into a worn-out material, it will travel further, carrying aboard the message about the Earth and human civilization. In about 40,000 years, Voyager 1 will probably drift within the next star, i.e. AC+79 3888.

It maybe sounds quite odd that I have started the chapter about performance art in Second Life with the description of a space probe, lost somewhere in the outer space. However, I believe both spaces, the outer space as well as the virtual one of Second Life, share certain similarities. It’s not just the fact that both spaces are hard to imagine and conceive within the confines of our fundamentally terrestrial thinking. In a certain sense, they are both abstract and infinite for our perception. They cannot be sensed and experienced directly by our senses and bodies, on the contrary, the experience of them is bound to be mediated. Though, this does not mean that we cannot reach into them by our physicality; we can make this, but our embodied presence in these places is quite different than here.

Broadly speaking, we approach and explore these spaces by a kind of probe that becomes the area of sensitivity, thus extending our human perception. When, for example, the space probe is travelling through the outer space, it can do this because it has been turned into a body equipped with sensors, helping it to sense, move, and navigate through the space. Although an artificial body, or a technological body, it has kept certain features human bodies possess. Even if we lose the direct grip or control of it, it does not cease to be the (extended) part of us, of our human bodies. It is still the probe in the literal sense – an exploratory device, designed to investigate and obtain information on a remote and unknown region. Besides, it is the probe in its symbolic meaning – created to delve and explore the new, secret, unknown territories, either physical spaces or virtual, imaginary ones, being an extension of humanity in general.

Like avatars, created by men and inhabiting 3D virtual worlds, space probe Voyager 1 is an intelligent extension of our bodies, being itself a kind of virtual body, an avatar. Its autonomy can even proceed to such an extent that Voyager 1 can liberate itself from man’s management and become an independent device, living on its own. However, it is not just a weird, utopian suggestion, this is truly going to happen. In the following years, NASA is planning to shut down Voyager 1 and cut off the communication with it as its energy resources will slowly decrease. Then, the space probe will turn into an emancipated techno-object, the technological form of life that will “breathe” and move on its own. It will lose its utilitarian, anthropocentric and control-oriented management and will turn into a life-like system. Such an anticipated destiny of Voyager 1 has also become of interest to artists; it is not the first time that outer space has gained their interest – the Russian avant-garde had already dreamt about outer space as an aesthetic space (cf. Malevich’s exclamation “Follow me, comrades in flight, into the depths!” from the title of this chapter). In 2013 Slovenian artists Miha Turšič and Špela Petrič presented the first part of the project on Voyager, entitled Voyager/ 140 AU that included the preparations for turning the Voyager into an independent, emancipated technological form of life (more about the project: Petrič, 2013). The project was produced by The Cultural Centre of European Space Technologies (abbreviated KSEVT), located in a small Slovenian town of Vitanje, and is a part of the broader initiative for “space culturalization” and post-gravity art, taken by KSEVT (KSEVT, 2014).3

One of the issues addressed by art project Voyager/ 140 AU is the problem of life. By creating protocellular patterns with emergent characteristics (Petrič wrote more about the creation of this
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