Chapter 7
Imagination and the Phenomenology of Virtual Practice

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ABSTRACT

The experience of creating in technology-mediated spaces through an avatar form brings the phenomenological experience of the body into the act of creating itself. Ways of explaining this creative process and its relationship to imaginative experience highlights a phenomenology of virtual practice of artists working in this realm. This chapter explores the phenomenology of the imagination in relation to embodied experience and considers the implications of phenomenology as a methodological approach and presents the case for investigating artistic and imaginative experience through adapting phenomenological research methods.

INTRODUCTION

We insert ourselves into a philosophy and it transforms us from the inside out (Kozel, 2007, p.4)

According to Edward Casey ‘imagination (in Western thought) is not securely situated in regard to such decidedly different acts as sensory perception and conceptual thinking’ (Casey, 2000, p.19). Perhaps this is because ‘imagining is easy enough to enact as experience, but it is extremely difficult to capture in midair for the purposes of scrutiny and examination’ (Casey, 2000, p.4). This chapter considers
the importance of investigating imaginative experience in relation to the process of artistic creativity in virtual worlds. Through adapting existing phenomenological research methods it discusses the ways in which the ‘virtuality’ of the space and the art created have impacted on the analysis in what is termed here as a *phenomenology of virtual practice* of artists working in virtual space.

Since its inception artists have been exploring the virtual space of *Second Life* where the act of creating is already mediated through technology. In a review of artworks created in *Second Life* in the last fifteen years the sheer array of work created across a broad range of artistic disciplines such as art, architecture, performance, film, and media arts is salient. From early *Second Life* music performances by Susanne Vega (2006) and Duran Duran (2006), to the Chinese artist Cao Fei’s *Second Life* projects including *iMirror* (2007), an installation and three-part documentary about Fei’s avatar identity, *China Tracy*, and *RMB City* (2008-ongoing), to Paul Sermon’s public interactive installation *Liberate your Avatar* (2007) and his more recent collaborations with Charlotte Gould in *Mirror on the Screen* (2012): these all point towards a retesting of artistic principles in virtual world spaces. Artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman worked with Stanford University to develop *Life to the Second Power* (2007-ongoing), documenting and archiving two of her projects, *The Dante Hotel*, and *Roberta Breitmore*. A number of performance-based works relied on a re-enactment of historical performance art, such as *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) which Marina Abramovic performed at the Guggenheim, re-enacting seven significant historical and noted Performance Art works, and Eva and Franco Mattes *Synthetic Performances* (2009-10), exploring what they term an ‘imponderable medium’ (Lichty 2008, p.6). More recently works such as

But what of the artist’s experience of creating mediated through the presence of an avatar form?

**BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH**

**On the Virtual and Imaginary**

Casey commented in his book *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Casey 2000) that, at the time of its first publication in 1976, a ‘concerted phenomenological study of the imagination had yet to be done’ (Casey 2000, p.xi). In this research it has been found that any substantial study of the virtual and the imaginary together has yet to occur. There have been some passing associations, such as philosopher Brian Massumi’s link to the imagination as a ‘mode of thought’ that is most suitable to the virtual (Massumi 2002, p.134), or that of Pierre Levy, describing the imagination as one of the three vectors of the virtual (Levy 1998, p.28). As a starting point for
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