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The Form of Identity in Virtual Space.

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Abstract

Within constructed spaces our identities are evident in our interaction with objects, language and practice. The spaces that are understood as „virtual“ are additions to an environment we have to locate our bodies within. Objects of technology, an engagement with language or a practice of art utilise our bodies as the zero point for experience of space.

„Virtual space“ is constructed through the use of objects we associate with the idea of „virtual space“ such as consoles, computers and phones. The critical evaluation of virtual space has battled with the idea of the „disincarnated“ experience of content, where the body is not the starting point. Virtual space is populated by objects that have physical form. Much like the impossibility of a person surviving on information alone it has become evident that the idea of a virtual disembodied utopia must come back down to earth.

The discussion of the form of our identity in virtual space has had to redefine what virtual is, and how form can participate in constructing space. The discussion of form has had to contextualise a concrete practice and a beginning point within the body. The ideas and theories of Lakoff and Johnson, Carr, Talbot, Fei, Dibble, Rendell, Turkle, Barthes, Davies, Sontag, Hockney, and Merleau-Ponty are evidence that there is an embodied point of view and human experience of „virtual“ space.

This thesis will use concrete spatial strategies of an artistic and auto-ethnographic practice to show that virtual space and the form of identity are concrete components of everyday environments. *Form* plays pivotal role in deconstructing or constructing space. Through the use of panorama, as an object of technology as well as a strategy, space is constructed using form.

The term avatar used to discuss the „form“ of identity in virtual spaces, and in particular what we currently recognise as „online,“ software driven, or connective virtual spaces. I have recognised that virtual space as not separate but augmentative and I will discuss how the avatar has been utilised within my practice to define virtual space as augmentative to everyday spaces.

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Introduction

The form of identity in virtual space can be discussed through the critique of the avatar and how its function as a body for a user of „virtual“ space is defined. Within this critique it will become evident that the avatar can be defined from a number of different points of view or philosophical frameworks. One framework, for example, is that of Sherry Turkle within the context of the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic traditions that her writing on the subject of identity and its relationship with machines arrives from.

The avatar can be defined within the post-structural and structural approaches of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, De Certeau and De Saussure. With reference to the work of these theorists, the avatar can be further informed by the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Perec as an avenue to construct identity through practice and speaking as a form.

„Space,“ with a particular focus on „virtual space,“ is embodied. Space can be defined as an embodied point of view. Barthes, Georg Perec, Merleau-Ponty, as well as Lakoff and Johnson all discuss that the „point of beginning“ of our perception of space is constructed by the „point of view“. In other words our first point of reference is ourselves, what Merleau-Ponty and Barthes would call a „zero point“. This idea is capitalised on by writers such as Mark Hanson to suggest that even „virtual“ space is initially perceived in an analog fashion, and therefore must be embodied. The definition of „virtualization“ used by artists such as Char Davies and Cao Fei advocates for the embodied „virtual“ space and throws into question the nature of what „virtual“ actually is.

Interspersed throughout this document my own practice can be discussed. The balance of content and context within a surface of an image can be discussed using strategies of sketching and panorama that construct a point of view. My own practice is the form of a constructive and concrete investigation of an auto-ethnographic experience of virtual space and identity.

I have confronted a concrete and embodied „point of beginning“ to „virtual“ space as well as the joining of many parts within a panoramic practice to construct a definition of „virtual“ space. This panoramic sketching is then applied to a concrete practice. I have throughout my practice, and will throughout this document, confront the tangible *form* that the body can have in spaces that are labelled „virtual,“ because of their association with processes that

construct the context of „virtual“ (such as through technological augmentation), within everyday space.



Figure 1: „Night,” Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

Chapter 1: The Avatar

An avatar is a *form* that digital identity takes, it acts to represent or reproduce an active presence in a virtual space. In practice this „reproduction“ stands in for a user and represents their presence and participation in examples that range¹ from virtual performance spaces or art spaces, to video games or social networking websites. Yet an avatar is defined as something that not just represents but also reproduces the user; it *is* the active presence of the user virtual space². When we take into consideration the complication of understanding virtual reality as an augmentation to everyday life, (rather than understanding it as a process by which the body is completely left behind in favour of a digital body,) then an avatar describes fracture – that is, a structure that is composed of many parts – as well as ambiguity – the way that an understanding of something can change depending on context.

The etymology of the word avatar is „Avatāra.“ Sanskrit in origin the word „Avatāra“ referred to the human form taken by a god (R Cooper, 2007). The use of the term Avatar to

¹ Within the scope of this discussion on avatars I would include, for example, a wired or connected avatar that you would find with a PlayStation 3 users profile. Literally the users profile is called an „avatar“ on this platform.

² For example avatars on the platform I discussed above (that of the PlayStation 3) can become „friends“ whereby they compare information pertaining to their activities on the console. Eg. Scores, played games etc.

describe a user of a virtual space came through its use in at first singular instances of computer games such as „The Quest of the Avatar“ in 1985 and in literature such as „Snow Crash“ by Neil Stephenson in 1992 (R Cooper, 2007). The term avatar is now used widely to discuss online identity.

The avatar is a representation, reproduction or an ambiguity³. As a digital identity it is seen in many different or reoccurring contexts. Within the context of internet technology, our personal information is stored as it is transferred between many networked machines so, while deleted information might register as deleted to a user, there is little guarantee that this is the case. I recently encountered blog posts I had composed many years ago containing artwork and writing. It is appropriate that the term „avatar“ is used to describe these re-encounters with other versions of ourselves⁴.

The critique of avatar captures the fracture, or the many connections, that objects of technology introduce into our environment. There is a perception of distance between the body and the „virtual“ environment by the abstraction of graphics and language from a physical experience. However, users of technology have a physical relationship with interfaces into virtual space, and do so with an ever-increasing variety of objects. Hence, an engagement in „virtual space“ is an engagement with objects of technology.

Avatars are increasingly thought of as synonymous with online identity, and online identity can be constructed in different ways. However, by focusing our understanding of avatars on a disembodied identity (the „cyborg“⁵) and notions of disincarnation (Christine Paul, 2008)

3 Roland Barthes would understand an avatar as information which is constructive of identity undergoing deformation, through the re-presentation of the information within the constantly changing context provided by internet and other connected media.

4 Within content management systems that manage large Internet sites, there is an ability to „roll back“ a website to a previous iteration, in order to view the changes made by individuals. Within offices, while you might delete emails from your inbox, there is a very good chance that all mail is cached (or stored) by the server that controls inward and outward email traffic or manages the emails for download by the user via a POP client or similar technology. The reason that emails are private is their sheer quantity or that no-one would think to read them without a good cause.

5 The emergence of the cyborg can be linked to World War Two. Information became critically realized in this era as distinct from matter and energy and the advocates of such philosophy (such as Norbert Wiener,) „required artifacts“ (Hayles, 1999, Pg.14) that could prove this, in other words cybernetics, and cyborgs. Through these artifacts and the development of machines that through „binary code ...that could conceivably reproduce themselves,“(Hayles, 1999, Pg.6) humans became seen as „essentially similar“ to intelligent machines. Indeed Immanuel Kant had already hypothesized the conclusion of an individual’s ability to access a „nominal domain“ (or non-embodied view point) would be a „lifeless automata,“ (Zizek, 2006, Pg. 22) a machine that processed information but had no autonomy over its action and no unique ability to make a „moral“ judgment. (Zizak, 2006)

(Hayles, 1999) we bypass the constructions of identity made through language and our human relationship to space found in everyday life. The infrastructure of technology appends this human creativity; it does not replace it (Talbot, 2007). Similar to the way in which avatars can be constructed in different ways, they can also be deconstructed in different ways, resulting in differing points of view.

Deconstructing the cyborg or constructing the ascended avatar as a disincarnated being can become a hegemonic critical process. This is because the end result of viewing the avatar as representing distance is that a Cartesian mind/body dualism is inevitable. To jump to notions of a disincarnated or immersive virtual space avoids discussion of the context of the virtual identity that most of us engage with everyday though smaller augmentations. Receiving a call on a cell phone or finding a location using „Google Street View“ are both examples of how space is augmented by day to day tasks.



Figure 2: 'Bus stop2,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

A touchstone of my initial study and practice were objects that defined or contained a „personal space“ and later became objects that made sense of space and that revealed a human construction of a system that managed fracture. Examples included postcards and letters or inflight meals on planes. These augmentations of my own relationship to space implied notions of virtuality, which included unseen structures and boundaries. The structure inherent in the postal system represented firstly the desire for connection, and secondly the development of a system that managed this. The human quality of handwritten words brought with it a presence that is accessed via the connection of a system of many parts (the postal system).

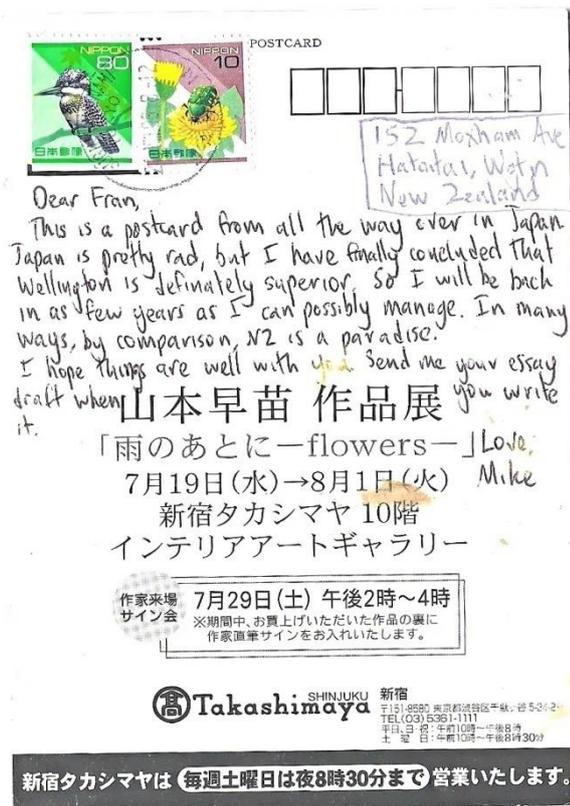


Figure 3: Found artefact: A postcard received from a friend living in Japan, 2008.

Technology that embodies human presence is not restricted to high-end phones or computers. It is also the connections, found in the structures, which imply many parts of a „machine“⁶. Connections are only possible because of a fractured environment; one thing cannot be connected to another if the two are already a single entity (furthermore, it cannot be connected if a dichotomy has rendered the two distinct, such as with the Cartesian mind/body duality⁷ (Davies 2008)).

The momentum of science and technology toward a more streamlined interaction with virtual space already poses questions about how our identities and relationships are recognised and maintained in an environment augmented by technology. Perhaps the reason that we are so enchanted by images, films and writing about a disembodied „virtual reality“ is that the idea of a „utopian“ vision of disincarnated freedom and limitlessness has more appeal than the alternative, an urban⁸ environment of enclosed spaces.

⁶ Examples being the various post services whose coordinated efforts get my postcards to and from Provincial China, or the structure that supported the inflight meal I received on my trip to Australia last year.

⁷ When discussing the mind in such a way the body is excluded from discussion and vice versa.

⁸ The reality of an urban environment has recently become the most likely one for any human person on this planet. “The earth has become a predominantly urban planet... For the first time in history, as

In 1969 Desmond Morris compared the mass of people living in cities and suburbs to a “restless menagerie,” (Morris, 1969 Pg.9). In the 21st Century People media and technology has become all pervasive within these environments (Hübler & The Department of Arts & Media, Zurich University of the Arts, 2008, Pg.43). By unpacking the structures that support our engagement with an augmented virtual space, such as how the avatar is an engagement with virtual space from a human point of view, we can unpack the connections and fractures within these spaces. The critique of the avatar is simultaneously an engagement in the critique of virtual space; in other words it is possible to critique the avatar as a space.

By viewing the „virtual“ as something that is located within the context of fracture rather than within the context of distance we are able to critically evaluate it in a way that makes sense to our bodies (or form). Access to the „virtual“ via disincarnation does not take into account the physicality of an interface, and of a user’s continual physical context.

Additionally, by viewing avatars through the context of distance and disincarnation implies that every experience in a virtual space is profound. The ownership of any profound artistic statement is more profitably discussed within the parameters of the artwork, content or context (situation of the work) rather than within the scope of a disincarnated experience.

My physical context within the images and drawings I have produced is evidence of a discussion about the scope of human form as a method for defining space. The physical context of the form of the avatars (or representations of the user of the space) is present in the construction of the viewpoint around the form, both as the author and as the subject of the drawing. Each picture begins as exploration of the space it is generated by (such as a response to the space of focusing, turning and assessing each image), but through being manipulated by software it becomes an exploration of the space around the forms that are held within it. The content of a merged panorama responded to as a construction of a space, recontextualised on a surface of technology. E.g. Paper, the screen.

of some unknown date in 2007 or 2008, a majority of the world’s population live in towns and cities,” (Pg. 28, Beattie, 2009). “Every day there are an additional 180,000 people in cities and towns all over the world,” (Habitat: Backgrounder, by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), ww2.unhabitat.org/istanbul+5/back1.doc, downloaded 9/1/2010).



Figure 4: 'StagePlay,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

The avatar itself has a far more complex form than a „stand in“ for a user. As a device, it is generated by the continued investment in these constructions. The avatar is the portal through which the virtual space is accessed; it is the facilitator, or activator, of the environment. The avatar and constructed space are one and the same because the avatar is the first construction we generate in our engagement with space⁹.

By constructing space within various frameworks, such as those of a psychoanalytic framework or a post-structural or structural framework, the shape of identity is defined and redefined. That is, because the avatar has a relationship with identity, whereby it can reproduce an identity, represent an identity or be constructive of an identity, a slippage occurs in which the avatar’s form comes to be understood as a volume, much as a body has volume, that can be „filled“ with human qualities (such as speech) that are defined through use¹⁰.

The way in which identity can return to appear differently in each framework is echoed in the constant re-runs of self encountered through an engagement within augmented virtual space. I do not, in this thesis, seek to limit „virtual space,“ nor to anthropomorphise it, but to unlock a more complete understanding of it through locating the *conflict* between ideas of fracture (a spatial construction) and ambiguity found in a continual re-presentation of information, in the sense that each new context distorts the form of identity, constructing potential new meanings.

The avatar that I have defined can also be thought of as a virtualised object of technology (Turkle, 2008)¹¹. It is a computational artefact supported by software that allows us to

⁹ Within this approach, the form of the avatar appears to have followed its function.

¹⁰ This is a process that feeds back into itself – by „speaking“ we construct the avatar. The environment or function connected to having the avatar is also crucial – it must be compelling in order to convince us to invest in it.

¹¹ I will define the process of virtualization with reference to Nicholas Carr in chapter 3.

manipulate both it and the environment in which it is located. Through this technology a user is engaged in a virtual space; or to put it another way a user is able to construct a space in which they locate their identity. Sherry Turkle understands that “we are learning to see ourselves as plugged in technobodies,”¹² (Turkle, 1995, Pg.177). In her more recent writing, a trilogy that concludes with the book „The Inner History of Devices,” Turkle suggests that objects of technology are more than just a technical instrument but also an extension of the self (Turkle 2008).

The subjective effect of technology is arrived at through a continued use of an object like an avatar and the amount of autonomy given to it. Through the continued use of objects of technology to represent the identity of a user that same user becomes invested in the „life” of that object. There are certainly cases found in the recent history of online avatars and the users they „represent,” to see that in cases where the avatar is traumatized, the trauma translates to the user of the avatar. Julian Dibbell’s landmark article „A Rape in Cyberspace” (http://www.juliandibbell.com/texts/bungle_vv.html) from 1993 describes real trauma to users of the avatars due to their avatars being subjected to the inappropriate actions of another user in LambdaMOO, an experimental online space¹³.

In the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic traditions that Turkle comes from identity is brought to live inside „people” objects. Turkle believes that the discussion of „object” objects needs to be elevated so it can be studied with that same degree of nuance and complexity as the studying of people (Turkle, 2008). An example of „object” objects as containers for identity might be illustrated in cases such as where a cell phone or other object might be likened to a part of our bodies. The loss of a significant photograph or hare loom item might feel like the loss of a small part of your own identity. The investment in the object obtained by using objects of technology, or the investment in the story the object belongs to, constructs this relationship.

The nature of the objects of technology I have looked at, like the surface of a screen, or piece of paper, or computer, or cell phone, is that of portability. These objects contain information

¹² Indeed when I forgot which page of the book „Life on the Screen; Identity in the Age of the Internet,” I had found the quote - rather than turning to the appendix of my copy I typed it into Google. I was able to verify the first result as correct using my own copy of the text. In a way I was able to augment my memory with that of scanned and searchable excerpts of the book.

¹³ When I signed up to Second Life in order to generate some first-hand knowledge of this game, a glitch in the games software translated visually to the disappearance of my avatars skin – leaving a black silhouette of empty screen space, though still wearing the clothes I had selected for my character. I felt uneasy; part of my autonomy over my avatar was not with me but removed by the glitch.

we use to define an infinite public space constructed by a conversation, a picture, or a combination of both that form an interactive environment.

Objects of technology extend the opportunities to view or give purpose to any particular space. They extend the scope of communication across distance. They make spaces *portable*. As we have grown more accustomed to the fluidity of space and the ways in which it can be recontextualised and redefined, we have developed strategies to help us define relationships with space, such as that of the avatar. The avatar and the body must be together defined as a form that is able to be applied to a conjoined or „mixed reality“(Hanson, 2006).

I did consider at an earlier stage in my research that the camera as an object of technology was part of the structure of a space like my studio, because it defined a relationship with it; it represented my own activity and presence. However, I came to the conclusion that the surface of the panorama I constructed was actually a better strategy for discussing objects of technology. The panorama made the studio space that I was working in portable¹⁴, extending the conversation of the avatar and of the representation of self onto multiple surfaces; an augmented space of my own making.



Figure 5: 'Kitchen,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

Technologies, which we treat as instrumental or useful, must also be seen in another light. “I have long argued that behind every instrumental technology, that’s what the technology does *for* you, there is another technology, I call it a subjective technology, which is what technology does *to* you. To you as person, to you as a family member, to you in the way you see yourself, think about your past, your present, you possibilities for change,” (Turkle, 2008, <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/634>). Objects of technology are also subjective, which is to say the user of the technology is affected by it.

Turkle, though, is careful to define technology objects in the wider context of all objects. The extension of self through the understanding of objects that can contain presence of self (or of others) is found in examples ranging from computers to objects that have nothing to do with contemporary notions of technology, such as memoirs or photographs. Certainly

¹⁴ The strategy to make the studio I was using at home portable in one form or another was also necessitated by the need to widen the scope of the spaces I could use in my practice.

within photography the investment of identity into the photographed form is clearly described by Roland Barthes when he spoke of transforming himself “in advance into the image” (Barthes, 1981, Pg.10). Barthes himself wondered about the nature of the form he had constructed and the fracture between the autonomy of that form and his own.



Figure 6: 'Untitled Studio,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

The degree of autonomy or authority the avatar has within any given space is a measure of how much it not only represents the user but reproduces it. The contrast between the „point of view“ as a space that is contained by a screen or by a human beginning point, and the limitless space environments that Second Life or computer games try to describe, is somewhat incongruous. The makers of these environments sell to the user a utopia of absolutely free action but this utopia can never really be delivered.

Computer or console games (common consoles include the Xbox, PlayStation and Wii) often have little room for autonomy. In the Warner Brothers title *Batman: Arkham Asylum* on the Xbox360, Batman, the player’s avatar, cannot stray from the limited paths and arenas in the environment, and despite the user controlling fights, movement and the order in which he completes the challenges in the game, the avatar is locked into a predetermined trajectory through the virtual environment.

While other virtual environments such as Second Life are without some of these preconceived limitations the avatars are still bound by the rules of the space they inhabit, such as the particular way the code controls the assets in the environment and translates it into information that can be recognised by the user such as words, sounds and graphics. The broad notions of an avatar as a space is reinforced by the economy of the screen, or the interface that contains for the user the point of view constructed around the avatar (Doesinger, 2008).

Within the context of identity constructed in virtual space the image of the avatar might be entirely made of language or may bear no resemblance to the user. The image of the self must be constructed to be more than just a „likeness.“ The visual similarity between the

identity constructed in virtual space and the user's identity in real space does not define the relationship between the two, therefore the degree to which the avatar or online identity resembles their user must be an aesthetic decision that the user has made rather than an instrumental part of the form. Without an investment of identity into the avatar by the user, the avatar is not a component of identity; hence, mere „likeness“ is not sufficient, or even required.

I suggest the avatar is the act of „speaking“ that defines the environment we inhabit. As an individual engaged in an artistic practice, the form that represents my practice, engagement with structure, or investment in objects that define the space I construct must be my own work. It is not the „likeness“ found in the images of my own form, that constructs my active presence, or that defines the practice I have constructed. Rather it is the investment of my form within the making of the work, and the activity of responding to the idea of constructed space by making marks, taking photos and pulling these together. The drawings in my practice embody virtual space through their discussion of it - through their function as an avatar of the artist.

The concept of „practice“ itself becomes a virtualised one. I will discuss and define in „Chapter 4: Virtualisation,“ the process of virtualisation, but will summarise it by saying that it is a process by where one form recognised as a single object becomes distributed spatially as a number of objects that are pulled together again through a system to construct a single form. Practice is not defined by a single form or object but rather a discussion of ideas through conversation and through a number of objects, forms and works.

Works of art are often reproduced and discussed in a wide range of contexts. Reproductions of works occur as digital images found online, essays and documents found in books or journals, and any number of catalogues, advertisements and exhibitions. Just as a collection of work is referred to as a „body of work“, within this menagerie of images, documents and contexts the artist's practice becomes their form.



Figure 7: 'Body of work, Figure of speech,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

Chapter 2: Investing in Objects

Lakoff and Johnson propose the idea that bodies are containers and our skin is our bounding edge. “We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world outside us,” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, Pg 30). In other words, the body is the most immediate space we contain.

The container metaphor is defined as using the words *into* and *field* to describe space, space is comprehended as a container. Metonymy, on the other hand, is defined as presenting a whole by discussing part of it. Using only part of a person, such as their face, to present the

whole concept of the person is an example of this (Lakoff & Johnston, 2003). Metonymy has the added effect of presenting that part (i.e. a face) as more important than other parts, because it better describes the whole than the other parts might.

Different kinds of metaphor are then employed to contain the space outside our skins. Through their functional relationship with technology and space, and through devices in language such as metonymy used to make sense of these relationships, our bodies construct identity. That our visual field is a container in language is evident in such examples as a ship that comes *into* our *field* of vision. Another such example is light coming through my shut eyelids or putting food into my stomach. In this way the metaphor of a container is used to define the space we recognise to be us. The „container“ that Lakoff and Johnson use is defined by them as a particular kind of metaphor, a device in language used within all aspects of the way we exist in space.

The avatar could be viewed as something that is part of a „whole“ or presence of a person. This is because Lakoff and Johnson’s definition of metonymy is a small „part“ of an object or person that is representative of complete „whole“ of the object or person. Through the user’s investment of themselves „into“ the avatar using language, their form in the virtual space becomes confused with their other forms of identity. Words such as „into“ and „field“ reiterate the metaphor of the container (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, Pg.30), and the avatar in this way becomes part of the user’s identity. The space we understand as our bodies is constructed with devices in language.



Figure 8: 'Squirrels,' from the Series of the same name, Drawing, Frances Denton, 2008.

The on-going effect of allowing the same small part to represent the complete entity is that it leads to that part being more important than other small parts that might have been chosen instead. For example, the camera in my cell-phone will play an approximation of the „click-click“ noise when taking a picture. The device of the metonymic „click-click“ is widely accepted to represent a camera, and it now reproduces the form of a camera in audio visual media and interactive computer driven environments.

It is evident that metonymy *can* be constitutive of an avatar within the approach Lakoff and Johnson provide. However it should not be concluded that it is *always* constitutive of an avatar, nor is it the only way to construct one. A person may have multiple avatars that represent them simultaneously in many different virtual spaces, or that represents one of many different constructed identities in many different contexts. The logical conclusion of the „whole,“ based on any small part of a person will be different for any small part used and from every point of view and the „whole“ must be constantly asserted and constantly challenged.

In every context and environment our starting point is always our own point of view. Objects such as metaphor construct our relationship to space and our own identity within it by constructing containers and dividing bodies. While language is an activity it is also an engagement with sets of rules. Objects in language define our engagements with these rules.

The same engagement with connecting or revealing fracture in multiple representations of identity can be used to approach an engagement with the space we encounter every day.

The idea of the container of identity is now located within the way my practice has unfolded. The construction of space is located in the construction of each panoramic exercise.

Roland Barthes related a story in „Camera Lucida“ of finding his mother in a winter garden, a photograph of her as a young child, through his recollection of her, her childlike form echoing to Barthes the most recent time before her death as an invalid (Barthes, 1981, Pg.72). As the photographic fragments he found that bore likeness to her but did not give him the point of view of her that he sought, the winter garden was a construction Barthes made for his own recollection. Barthes considered in Camera Lucida the engagement with language (engagement in practice) that constructs space.

„Virtual“ space is an augmented and constructed space, recognizable but defined by its fractured materiality, and by the language and objects it is made of. While there are certainly aspects of an engagement with the internet (or comparably interactive¹⁵) technology that are new and associated with the materiality of computational power, computer memory and a raft of new interfaces to them both, the idea of an interaction through the use of language or objects to construct space or augment the everyday is a human one.

To construct the direction of viewing „virtual“ space through real space I needed to have a relationship with a concrete practice. What were ostensibly early drawings that would define the scope of the field included a number of creatures made of fur, human hair, unfired clay, and synthetic and natural fabric. These drawing defined an engagement with the concrete as a starting point for my practice. The installation of them in my studio was the first step to defining my own studio space a *site* with which to construct „virtual space.'

¹⁵ Comparable interactive networks include examples such as computers, consoles or cell phones and their respective networks.



Figure 9: 'Squirrel Climbing,' from the Series 'Squirrels', Frances Denton 2008.

The ability to move on from each gesture (or artwork) but retain the artefact of it within each new one had become not only a valuable strategy but also a pattern that delivered direction from the earlier work to that which has been presented as part of a final exhibition¹⁶. The strategy of continually building on each engagement with space provided critical insight into the relationship between the form(s) of identity and augmented virtual space.

My understanding of the avatar was informed by the many approaches to the constructing form and identity with virtual space, such as those by Lakoff and Johnson, Rendell, Turkle, Barthes, Davies, Sontag, and Hockney, as well as the writing of other esteemed critical

¹⁶ I did not immediately realize the use of panorama as a strategy. Initially I used photography to progress the drawings I had made through the construction of artifacts. Through reflecting on the process of photographing small parts and putting them together I came to panorama as at first a solution and then as a strategy for further targeted investigation. The process of virtualization and its relationship to form is echoed in the processes and history of panorama photography.

theorists. Within their writing the avatar is defined as a device in language, an object of technology or an engagement in a dialogue that constructs an artistic practice.

Chapter 3: Transformed Bodies.

George Perec's "Species of Spaces" outlines a study of spaces that are close to hand, such as a „public park“ or the „Paris Metro.““There is nothing,” Perec says, “to stop us from imaging things that are neither towns nor countryside (nor suburbs), or Metro corridors that are at the same time public parks,” (Sturrock, 2008, Pg.5). But what happens when we not only imagine but we act on these imaginings. Imaginings become practice, and this practice redefines space.

Objects of technology can be viewed as devices in language with which we purpose a space. An example of this is when we turn a private space into a public space (such as sharing a personal photo album using an internet service such as Facebook), or a public space into a private one (using a cell phone for a personal call in a park). Technology in this way becomes part of the activity in the park or private space, and by using it we are able to, in this straightforward way, transform how we understand the space we inhabit.

In her „Cosplayers“ (2004) works, the artist Cao Fei shows us that this transformation is possible for anyone. The Cosplayers are young Asian men and women who feel transported into different space when they assume costumes of characters from media such as video games, anime or manga. Fei's work shows us glimpses of this „costume play“¹⁷ as the Cosplayers collide and battle with the context of Guangzhou (Bugden & Turei, 2007, Pg.28). This almost literal „uploading“ and „downloading“ of identity is a play in crossing the divide of digital reality into and out of a „real-life“ reality. The power of these character transformations is the treatment of identity (by the artist) as an object that can be recontextualised.

¹⁷ Nobuyuki Takahashi, a journalist, who in 1984 attended the western „World Science Fiction Convention,“ coined the word „cosplay“ after seeing Trekkies dressed up as characters from StarTrek. „Cosplay“ was the combination of the words, „costume“ and „play.“ The practice of dressing up as favorite characters from Japanese popular culture caught on. (Ashcraft, <http://kotaku.com/5432053/can-the-west-cosplay-with-the-best-of-them>, 9/01/2010.) Slightly different to the tradition of Japanese Masquerade „cosplaying“ as “characters gives them [the cosplayer] a chance to, not meet that character, but to become one with that character in a sense,” (Ai Amano as quoted in Ashcraft, <http://kotaku.com/5432053/can-the-west-cosplay-with-the-best-of-them>, 9/01/2010.)

Yet despite the dream-like imagery found in „Cosplayers“(2004) by Fei, the reproductions of self found in her work still contain real people. The costumed young men and women are still real despite having reproduced themselves as avatars of identities found in media or despite having reproduced themselves in Fei’s artwork. Fei gives these individuals autonomy, despite an obviously highly scripted video production, and the Cosplayers present themselves as authorities over their own actions. Just as with the video game „Batman,“ though the avatar cannot stray from a predestined path, the relationship constructed by the author of the space and the avatar within the space create opportunities for a power struggle where the avatar might overwhelm the author and speak for themselves. Cao Fei through her work might advocate that her virtual reality is not a dream; it is a site of real-life political resistance and personal internal conflict.



Figure 10: Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia?*, 2006-2007 video, 20 min Part of the installation *What Are You Doing Here?* Siemens Arts Program/OSRAM China Lighting Ltd., Foshan, Guangdong (Retrieved January 14, 2010, from <http://visualarts.walkerart.org/detail.wac?id=3693&title=past%20exhibitions>).

The internal conflict within another video work „*Whose Utopia*“ (2006) by Fei is located in the disparity between the dream of the workers arriving in the Pearl River Delta special economic zone for a better life, and the reality of working there.

Georg Perec describes space as a „doubt;“ never certain, but something that must be constantly marked (Sturrock, 2008, Pg.91). To me there is conflict not only in the notion of fragmented virtual space as augmentation (in the sense of describing an augmented space that is constantly being connected and fractured), but also the avatar as space with which we have a relationship, or alternately identify ourselves as being. The conflict of the different

relationships we construct with an augmented virtual space and through our own bodies create this „doubt,“ this sense of ambiguity and customisation of form and space.

Sherry Turkle understands objects as spaces which are invested in by people, while Jane Rendell would assert that practice creates space from an engagement with language and rules. It is possible that, depending on how we approach identity in virtual space, both of these ideas are equally valid. Re-presenting identity as an object or through an action can be a meaningful critique of the construction of identity within each of these contexts. In the context of practice creating a space in which we locate a conversation and therefore an identity, we can come to the conclusion that identity is an *active practice*. In the context of an object in which we locate identity, identity is located *within the artefact* of practice.

The way language is wielded by people determines how we understand the spaces we inhabit, and then how we inhabit that space. Jane Rendell highlighted the anthropologist Michel de Certeau and Ferdinand de Saussure in her argument that “space is a practiced place,” in the keynote address „(The Re-Assertion of time into) Critical Spatial Practice“ at Massey University’s One Day Sculpture Symposium 2009. De Saussure and De Certeau’s description of language as a system of rules is defined broadly by Rendell. Governing rules of language are called „langue“, while the act of actively engaging with these rules or „speaking“ is referred to as „parole“ (Rendell, 2009, Pg.7). When we understand the use of container metaphors, we can see that we construct space as a vessel in which we situate ourselves, or alternately an artistic practice might also construct a vessel in which a dialogue is situated.



Figure 11: 'Autonomy4,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

Perec’s view, and Rendell’s theory of „space“ as a „practiced place,“ clearly understands that language is active as well as transformative. The practice I described earlier of engaging

with public spaces as private spaces using objects of technology (and the opportunities they present) can transform the space from public to private¹⁸. In order to reveal how objects of technology actively function within our environment as various tools of language we can contextualise them within Rendell's „critical spatial practice,“ and within the De Certeau and De Saussure's terms, „langue“ and „parole“.

Art practice within the context of „langue“ and „parole“ could function as a “practice of speech,” (Rendell, 2009, Pg.7) as well as a “social critique,” (Rendell, 2006, Pg.2). In the same way that Rendell describes activating space through actively „speaking“ or engaging with language, if we understand the avatar as a reproduction of the user, the avatar actively engages with the language of virtuality. Alternately if we were to view the avatar as a representation of a user it becomes the user's engagement with virtual space and consequently part of the language the user wields.

Cao Fei's „Cosplayers“ (Fei, 2004) work in Guangzhou and „Whose Utopia“ (2006) transformed the city, and the OSRAM factory respectively, by asking the viewer to look at it from a different point of view, using devices in language from new media such as the torrenting of identity by the cosplayers in her video work. The viewers of this artwork were asked to imagine a Guangzhou within the context of a virtual space, one that can be arrived at through re-presenting the nature of a fast expanding metropolis as an equally fast expanding, deforming mythology.

¹⁸ And vice versa

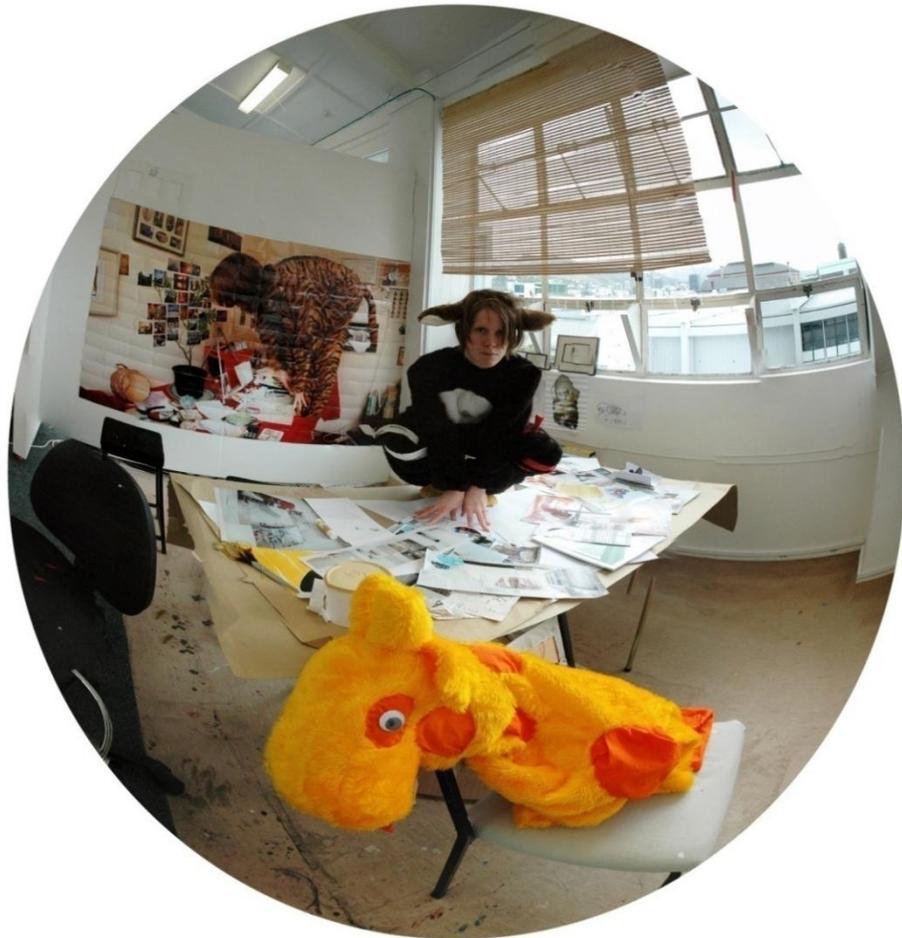


Figure 12: 'Second Day,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

Myth is a part of a semiological system (Barthes, 1972). In this system myth is part of an ongoing cycle of events in language inherent in the way information is understood. "The concept... is a kind of nebula... more or less hazy," (Barthes, 1957, Pg. 122). Within Barthes's semiological system the „form“ and „signified“ push each other along indefinitely. The signified and the signifier activate to form a sign, this sign is then taken and it becomes the signifier which is activated by the signified to become a sign and so on. The 'Myth' is the "second order semiological system," (Barthes, 1957, Pg.114) or the recontextualised sign. The Myth is recognised as an opportunity to re-understand information based on the surrounding context.

Fei's expression of the virtual Guangzhou in „Cosplayers“ utilises the reproduction of reality in the form of creativity, in the form that is the avatar, in the form of the language of the youth's gestures and behaviour, and in the form of art. "Barthes understood... that literature is first of all, last of all, language. It is language that is everything. Which is to say that all of

reality is presented in the form of language,” (Sontag, 1982, Pg.xx) and the reality the viewer brings with them to an instance of language (in that instant in time) is captured in the form of language¹⁹.



Figure 13: Char Davies, Forest Stream, Ephemère (1998) (Retrieved January 14, 2010, from <http://www.immersence.com/>).

Davies’ engagement with virtual space is present in her works *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephemère* (1998) as an engagement with „immersive” virtual space; or rather one where a user would engage with the space through a computer interface that completely encompasses the user’s visual and aural senses.

Char Davies sees virtual reality as a way to release her audience from „habitual perceptions,” (Char Davies, 2004) and rather than “approaching the medium [of virtual space] as a means of escape into some disembodied techno-Utopian fantasy” (Char Davies, 2004) she sees it as a way to challenge the idea of a divided virtual space and human body. Virtual space holds the potential to raise the idea that the body and the space are inextricably and spatially connected. For a start, through the strategy of employing breathing and the shifting centre of gravity of the body (rather than an externalised device²⁰) as a means of navigation in the works *Osmose* and *Ephemère*, the experience of space is linked to the space of a human body. The design of the environment itself and the content indicated an experience

¹⁹ An internal or external dialogue as a response to a visual form.

²⁰ A joystick.

constructed from memory and language by employing ambiguous forms in 3D space as well as computer code and text.



Figure 14: 'An Avatar and Doug in my Studio,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

The most profound virtual space we inhabit is the one that we currently find ourselves in. This virtual space is constructed by the augmentation of the space harnessed by a body, with objects of technology, language and practice. “As a realm ruled by the mind, virtual reality – as conventionally constructed, is the epitome of the Cartesian desire, in that it enables the construction of artificial worlds where there is the illusion of total control where aging mortal flesh is absent, where, to paraphrase Laurie Anderson, there is no “dirt,” (Davies 2004). The point of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* is not to add to the culture of the disembodied virtual environment. Therefore it is important to differentiate an immersive virtual space from a disembodied virtual space. The critique of the spaces found within *Osmose* and *Ephémère* must therefore be located in an immersive and embodied space rather than a disembodied one.

When the idea of „entering“ (Paul, 2008) virtual space is discussed there can be the implication that a non-virtual space is exited. While Paul (2008) has provided a generic definition of virtual space the critique of the work of an artist like Char Davies, *Osmose* and

Ephemère, must be embodied. Davies has gone to great lengths to ensure that the experience of both these works is contextualised by the viewer's own body²¹ (Davies 2004).

Davies intentions are to transform the viewer's own perception of the „virtual“ world that we currently inhabit and to challenge the perception of the space that we construct. Davies “came to the medium of immersive virtual space as a painter, seeking a more effective means of communicating [her] sensibility of the world,” (Davies 2004). Her own engagement with ambiguous form is constitutive of her activation of a personal environment for the viewer, which is also found in her earlier paintings²² of glass jars on mirrors and of the resultant abstracted spaces and light forms (Davies 2004).



Figure 15: Char Davies, 'Glass Jars & Mirror', 1985. Oil on Canvas (Retrieved January 14, 2010, from <http://www.immersence.com/>).

“All of reality is presented in the form of language,” (Sontag, 1982, Pg.xx). With Sontag in mind it would appear that Davies asks the viewer to bring to the ambiguous form the reality they construct themselves. Merleau-Ponty describes space starting from within the self, and using the self as a “zero point”²³ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964 as cited in Davies, 2004). This „point of beginning“ relationship with the constructed space Davies paints (whether it be with paint,

²¹ One of these measures is the momentum of the viewer in both *Osmose* and *Ephemère* is controlled by their breathing and body weight rather than joystick or controller, as mentioned earlier. (Davies 2004)

²² Done with prescription glasses removed.

²³ Barthes also talks about the idea of a Zero Point in his essay „Writing Degree Zero“ (Pg. 31, Sontag, 1982)

pencil or with computer software), is the relationship Davies asks her viewers to find within her works. The point of beginning does not originate from Davies use of virtual space but out of her engagement with the ideas of constructed space as constructed bodies and the aesthetic of ambiguous space.

Within the object we invest identity and through this process we create a space of reflexion or extension (augmentation). Within language and practice we present and purpose spaces in which we find ourselves. It is through the construction of language that we find virtual space, a space perhaps captured in the form of language, or invested in the form of language that is presented to us, or constructed by us through our engagement with language. These three approaches deform, take on parts of each other, or fit together differently each time they are approached, but each of them has a relationship that constructs space from our body.

“All these acts are real,” (Nelson & Shiff, 2003, Pg.91,) and are contained within the framework of the real life of the self, yet in the practice of art and in an artist’s life they are also mimetic or representative. The activating virtual space, the avatar acts as if it was real, yet the avatar is still at an arms (or keyboards) length from its real self, and therefore must be mimetic. However, if the virtual space is the one we inhabit every day then the point of beginning for my avatar is my own embodied identity. The form of the avatar I engage with online, or in Second Life, or if I were to experience Davies’ work for myself, must begin with the space I understand to be contained by my own body.



Figure 16: „Catsuit4,“ Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

Within the spatial construction of my practice engaged with panorama, physical artefacts of drawing and practice shift to be consistent with the constructed point of view. The point of beginning in the space is the body looking into the reproduction of another body which is recorded as the constructed space (recorded in multiple instances of that time with multiple photographs). My own engagement with the space is real, and yet it is also mimetic. The kitchen or studio is a space in which virtual spaces are constructed as well as a virtual space constructed with panorama photography. The nature of virtual space is not bound within computer or internet technologies, but constructed by the augmentation of these spatial technologies to practice.



Figure 17: Close up of „Catsuit4.“

In the above close up of an image „Catsuit4“ from my own practice, it is evident that images from earlier in the body of work play a crucial role in taking the practice forward. These artefacts are able to define the space for subsequent images from this body of work to be produced within.

Chapter 4: Virtualization

All around us what we term „virtual“ space has crept into our everyday life. But what is virtual space? Is it the devices that give us access to it? Is it the network of servers sitting in warehouses, humming and whirring? Is it the fibre optics and copper wires? Is it the data stored on the servers, the 0 and 1 values in a wave form, the translated content of a 3d model or website? Can we determine where virtual space is? What it is? Where do we „go to“ when we „enter into“ virtual space? Do we go anywhere at all?

Nicholas Carr explains the technical concept of 'virtualization' using the example of a telephone answering machine. The first iteration of an answering machine was a standalone, analogue, tape-machine. The second version had a computer chip, a smaller and digital part of the telephone's form. Now the answering machine is completely digitized, instead of taking the *form* of tape machine, its functions are "replicated though software code," (Carr,

2008, Pg.75)²⁴. The telephone answering machine has become a "virtual machine," (Carr, 2008, Pg.75) that exists as part (or many networked parts) of various machines belonging to a telephone company and supplied as a service. Virtualization is the construction of a virtual machine out of software which exists on other networked machines. Another way to look at virtualization would be as a fractured machine.

The utility of the Internet connection or the portability of computers and their capacity to extend our own abilities is considered normal, an essential, like electricity. Carr refers to Google and Amazon as examples of companies who are at the leading edge of supplying services such as software or processing power via a "socket in the wall" (Carr, 2008, Pg.5). Much as individual residences do not generate their own electricity (for better or worse), the ownership of processing power or software can be approached in the same way, and can also be supplied and consumed as needed. This leads to a paradigm shift, and we can start to recognize the technology of computing as a utility, a "cheap universal commodity," (Carr, 2008, Pg.5). The shift occurs when the utility of these services changes the way we inhabit space and perceive our own bodies and identities differently.

However, there is a "failure to reckon adequately with the computer as a human expression" (Talbot, 2007, Pg. 194). Steve Talbot (2007) argues that the computer is currently still an artefact of a human expression; a "manifestation of intelligence," (Talbot, 2007, Pg.194) but of our intelligence, as with all other human made artefacts.

By keeping the computer as "an expression of living beings" (Talbot, 2007, Pg.195) they are an integral and vibrant part of human activity. Rather than trying to coax intelligence from the computer we can instead recognize that "the intelligence is really there, objectively," (Talbot, 2007, Pg.194), in the *artefact* of the computer as much as "in the sound waves uttered from our larynxes, in the pages of the texts we write, in the structure and operation of a loom, automobile or computer," (Talbot, 2007, Pg.194).

Following on from Talbot, if we are able to look at virtual space as a human expression then we can see that the intelligence of these spaces is a human intelligence. Within the current review of the work and writing of David Hockney a critique of virtual space can be located. An engagement with both fracture and ambiguity is found within the critiques of these strategies.

²⁴ Though we still need to access this virtual machine through a physical interface, the physical interface of a cell phone or telephone now has the *augmented functionality* of accessing an answering machine as well as its function of a telephone, (or indeed a camera).

As fracture is a spatial construction (i.e. in order to locate fracture we must realise there is space between the many separate parts,) the fracturing of identity by the means of photography, drawing, and the cubist approach of Hockney, renders an identity *as* a space. In virtual environments the scene is built or generated around the avatar's line of sight and body. Much as in the fragmented landscapes of Hockney, within a virtual environment the viewer is essential in order to define the constructed landscapes (Doesinger 2008, Pg.50).

A viewer is able to flick through the spaces and images Hockney constructed over time through the mass reproduction of them in bound collections (Hockney, 1993, Pg.115)²⁵. The re-presentation of his work meant that a viewer would be able to virtually engage with his practice in many different contexts. Hockney believed that all the reproductions of his work were valid expressions of his practice and paid close attention to the quality of these reproductions (Hockney, 1993). The context of the work he produced was an important aspect of his practice, because it discussed the surfaces he had constructed in joined photographs and drawings; this included the surfaces on which he worked, presented work, as well as the surfaces which he created within his images (surfaces as content).

The surfaces of the work within the images of artists such as Hockney, are constructed surfaces of practice. The surface of practice which is augmented by technology is touched upon by Char Davies in her argument that the human subject in the surface of virtual reality is not an "isolated viewpoint," (Richard Coyne, 1994, as cited in Davies, 2004), rather it is a viewpoint determined by personal context and through practice. One individual view point is an accumulation of many thoughts and considerations and Hockney uses the multifaceted strategies from cubism to discuss the impossibility of pinning a single moment down. Turkle challenges an isolated viewpoint with a human context, "we often talk about machines, and even to machines as if they were people," (Turkle, 1984, Page.273). The machine and the network contain „people qualities“ and construct virtual space as human space or body space. The „viewpoint“ of the surface we regard as virtual should be one we also regard as human.

²⁵ A David Hockney exhibition in 1981 was titled „Looking at Pictures in a Room“ with his painted work titled „Looking at Pictures on a Screen,“ and subsequent catalogue titled „Looking at Pictures in a Book,“ (Hockney 1993, Pg.111).



Figure 18: „Under my Clothes Line,“ Panoramic Sketch, by Frances Denton 2009.

In the work above it is evident that panorama has been employed as a strategy for considering constructed surface as an engaged practice of drawing. The mechanism of my own body engaged with the spaces that I am constrained by, is evidenced by a consistent return to the content within the surface of the image. The images constructed within the framework of my own practice contain the body and reconstruct the point of view as the point of beginning.

The reproduction of a constructed space (such as a studio, domestic kitchen, or a gallery, or in the space above under my clothes line,) within the modality of a screen, and then reproduced within the framework of a practice of drawing, touches on the production of work understood by Hockney. The space is at all times „real“ or it is at all times virtual. While the context of the artwork changes the viewpoint of the work. The human logic brought to the surface of the media changes the artwork (such as the differing sensibility of a screen compared with piece of paper), the fractured space that the engagement is with does not diminish the artworks realness, nor does the work become less virtual than it was originally.

In my practice I have negotiated panorama as an object of technology to construct form and space on paper. Because of an engagement with a language of fracture in which bodies are constructed, inhabited, or realised, the logic of the fractured body must be also be engaged with. It can be employed in as many ways as the practice of visual form can be realised. A strategy of panorama as a strategy for creating logic out of fractured parts is just one way that an engagement with the form of identity can be realised within a visual practice.



Figure 19: 'Catsuit on a Bike,' Source Images from Panoramic Sketch of the same name, Frances Denton, 2009.

Chapter 5: The Strategy of Panorama

The origin of the word panorama possibly refers to a vantage point or „lookout.“ However, the origin of the word is more likely to have been coined by Robert Baker after his patenting of 360° paintings in 1787. Panorama was then a new technology (Oettermann, 1997), and like many other technologies during the eighteenth and nineteenth century²⁶ it was constructed from two words of Greek origin, “pan [all] and horama [view]” (Oettermann, 1997, Pg.5).

²⁶ Telephone, automobile.

The shift in the meaning of the word from 360° painting, or „Ja nature à coup d’œil,“ (Oettermann, 1997, Pg.6) came via the appropriation of it by the natural sciences, buoyed by the increasing extent that people came to understand the world through technology (such as microscopes and hot air balloons). Panorama instructed the viewer on how to observe the mathematical concept of perspective and the horizon. In other words, it was a means of observing the natural world from a different point of view.



Figure 20: 'Nightpano,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

The use of the word panorama in the context of a „panoramic point of view“ meant „to look at a vista from a particular point of view“, and then came to mean an „overview of a field of knowledge“. It is somewhat ironic that panorama actually spoke of an individual or subjective overview in a time that was about imposing an objective and rational (analytical) overview.

In my own work, during the process of making decisions about scale prior to printing, by imagining the work „off the computer“ the fracture of digital work and work on paper was revealed. It was impossible on the iMac computer used in my practice to see the work at the dimensions it was to be printed, as the size of the image was larger than the dimensions of the screen. There was then choice between enlarging the image to the resolution it was to be printed (in which case I could see only part of it), or to see it in totality but at a smaller scale.

As an exercise I put together the body of the work as selection of shapes (actual dimensions) cut out of newsprint paper with their file names, associated image data (image resolution/dpi) and inexpensive thumb-nail reproductions of the image attached to them. The process of making constant mental references to the work on my computer had an influence on the way I perceived that the space I was engaging in was an illustration of a reality augmented by objects of technology, and I was determined to better understand this

augmentation through my practice. Panorama provides an opportunity to reproduce or represent the conversation at the time between my own point of reference and the location of the body of the work.



Figure 21: 'Engine Room Giraffe,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

It is evident that my practice is located on multiple different surfaces, and therefore is engaged with the mechanism of fracture I have discussed. The content of previous iterations can be located again and again in the finished image. However, the images eventually lose fidelity in their reproduction or representation in the more current works as they descend backwards in time. The artefacts of a recontextualisation of the image are evident, but often distorted until they are incomprehensible and unrecognisable, either by scale or by virtue of their compression via printing and being recaptured. Like a ripple in the surface of water they suggest an origin, a trajectory, and an effect.

The avatar is not inactive when the computer is turned off; it continues to affect our relationships and dialogues with the spaces we inhabit. We keep the modes of practice we have through our engagement with „virtual space“ in mind. An example of such behaviour is rather than remembering the name of a book, you ask that someone email you the details. This behaviour means that our engagement with virtual space is augmented by our experience in real space, or vice versa. They become as real or as virtual as each other.

The form of identity in the augmented spaces, or the avatar, is a tangible (though untouchable) real (though fractured) body. The avatar constructs the point of beginning that informs the space it inhabits. The avatar inhabits the space we inhabit through the augmentation of the way we understand space via technology.

Mario Gerosa discusses a case describing virtualisation inside a system of types, some of which, he suggests, are more virtual than others, (Doesinger, 2008). Gerosa separates what he describes as the “Fractured landscapes,” (Doesinger, 2008, Pg.47) where fracture is located between the conflict of an expectation of a place and the experience of it²⁷, from completely fictitious places (Gerosa would use the example of Second Life), and from “hybrid” places that come about through blending parts of „real“ life with what he labels “fantasy,” (Doesinger, 2008). Using this definition, an example of a hybrid space is a „cosplaying“ function. The venue itself is „real,“ but it is inhabited by characters from „fantasy.“

The potential flaw in trying to quantify how „virtual“ somewhere is, is that “reason is not disembodied, as tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies and bodily experience,” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, Pg.4). In other words, there is the idea that *everything* we engage with has an embodied form and has a point of beginning in our bodies²⁸.

Gerosa argues that within the context of Second Life, the 3D online environment, “the body expands conceptually and becomes the meeting point” (Doesinger, 2008, Pg.50). In order to reconcile these points of view we can surmise that Lakoff and Johnson’s “reason” is an activity, the *act* of reasoning, and that the body Gerosa discusses is a container metaphor from which the action originates. This is not to say „reason“ originates from the body, but rather it originates from the action of *engaging* with practice or „langue“ and „parole“ of the space, in this case the space of Second Life.

Gerosa’s meeting point is defined by the digital information that forms the body and the environment. In one way the body *is* the place in which Gerosa has determined to meet because Gerosa’s point of view is constructed within the screen. However, for the person Gerosa was meeting it could equally be reasoned that the environment Gerosa was seeing, as well as Gerosa’s avatar, came to meet them within the construction of their point of view

²⁷ Explored by Fei in her work in the Pearl River Delta

²⁸ Carr defines virtualization as a spatializing of an object of technology that abstracts it from its original form but still reproduces the function of it. Carr does not define virtualization as a process by which an object of technology is removed from the fabric of reality. The example of the answerphone Carr gave, the answerphone still has a form; the form has been spatialized.

(via the downloading of information necessary to engage with Second Life on their computer screen).

Just as the small part of the „whole“ that Gerosa constructs via his avatar, the other user of the space can construct their own „whole“ using the small part they have. Despite the similarity of the information being constructed within each of the screens Gerosa and his friend might see – the experience is different. This is because the information is held within the differing contexts of Gerosa’s and his friend’s points of view.

Working with drawing on paper has revealed to me the ambiguous territory that digital information on a surface inhabits due to it being regarded as only partially real and always the same. Because the „content“ of a drawing produced in practice is augmented with a digital method of producing content – a printer, DSLR Camera, Computer and photo-stitching software – it is a reproduction of another iteration of the same content elsewhere, and it leads to a territory in between reality and non-reality (fantasy). The paper and ink could not be the single „real“ part of the image just as the content would always be delivered within a changing context.

The decision to print at a scale I consider as being human is also a conscious choice. Print too large and the scale starts to suggest a conversation that is about scale, rather than content; too small and the conversation trends towards illustrations that lack a narrative component. The quality of the print is also managed. The fidelity must be high enough to reveal the image clearly and the materiality of the paper warm enough to allow a conversation about the digital and analogue production of drawings and paper works that describe identity, but without steering too far towards a discussion about photographic technique.

The strategy of bringing the images off the computer creates an opportunity to discuss how digital content is received by viewers. The evidence of the strategy’s success is the uneasiness of knowing that the image would have been slightly different on a screen; perhaps the colour would have differed, or scale of the image would have been larger or smaller. The expectation of what it might have been and what it *is* creates a personal conflict. Its „life“ is now presented in the context of a „real space“ on „real“ material. The content is not, however, „virtual,“ because it was printed by a machine. The works discuss the „virtual“ because the content is a human construction of a point of view (a container); it is a space constructed through the practice of drawing.

In 1787 the idea of space as a container was captured in the production of panorama because it introduced the idea of the field vision as something that is constrained by the limit of the

eye and the sensibility of mathematical perspective. Thus it could be recreated in the rotunda's paintings, theatre, and later in photography, film and most recently „virtual space.“ “More than just the aesthetic counterpart of a natural phenomenon, the panorama was both a surrogate for nature and a simulator; an apparatus for teaching people how to see it [the mathematical construction of perspective],” (Oettermann, 1997, Pg.12).



Figure 22: 'Corridor,' Panoramic Sketch, Frances Denton, 2009.

“The fact is that experience offers nothing like this, and we shall never, using the world as our starting point, understand what a field of vision is.” (Noë & Thompson, 2002, Pg.17).

In other words the viewer is the starting point for comprehending a *field* of vision, and vision as a field or container, is an extension of us. We cannot start by thinking of the world as information that stands apart from ourselves, because it can only be recognised through the senses we perceive it with. Panorama introduced the idea that vision can be contained within a field, and was itself regarded as an exercise in constructing this field or space. Later on panorama began to refer to an overview. This was due to the fact that discussing panorama was also to discuss the whole 360 degrees of comprehension contained in a single point of view.

“The primacy of the body [acts] as ontological access to the world and the role of tactility in the actualization of such access effect a passage,” in other words, “all reality is mixed reality,” (Hanson, 2006, Pg.5). This is another way of saying that everything is accessed via our bodies; there can be no difference drawn between various degrees of reality. Merleau-Ponty’s idea that the body must be the „starting point“ discussed by Alva Noë and Evan Thompson means the individual is the beginning point for the environment they perceive (Noë & Thompson, 2002). The conclusion that Hanson has drawn from this embodied access of experience, is that experience is analog (Hanson, 2006, Pg.6).

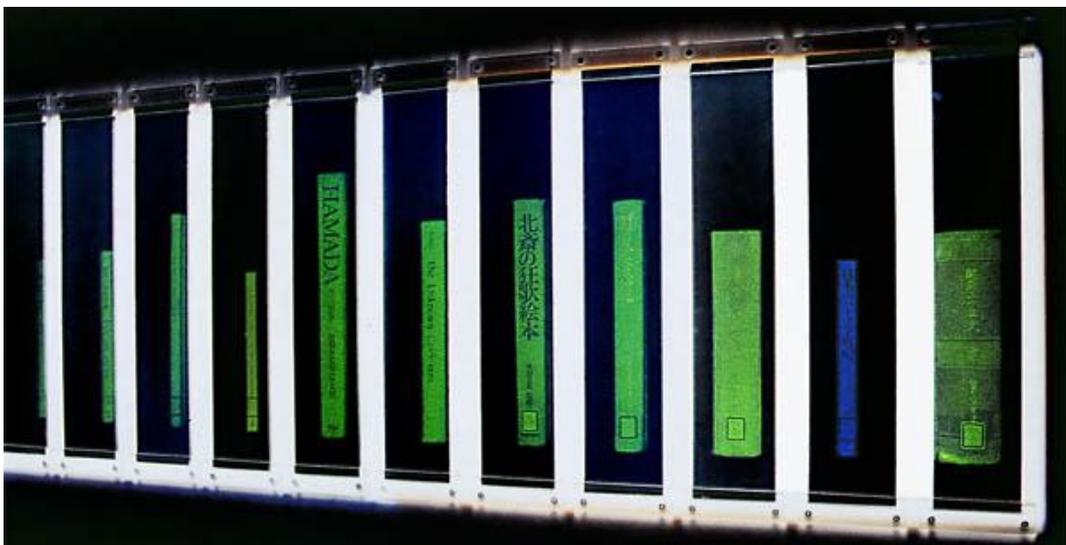


Figure 23: Detail from „Bibliography“, Wenyon and Gamble, 1991/1992 (Moriyama, 1995, Retrieved Jan 14, 2010 from <http://wengam.com/moriyama.html>)

Within their work „Bibliography“ (1991/1992), Wenyon and Gamble present holographs of books with their spines facing the viewer as if captured on a shelf or perhaps in an archive. These representations of books inhabit a space that speaks to the ideas of real and not real. The books themselves are untouchable and inoperable, but the object of technology of the

holograph is real. The holograph itself is a real reproduction of an aspect of the book that represents it (another example of metonymy). Whether the book is real or not real depends on the view point taken during the contemplation of the work.

Hanson claims that we have now matured in our understanding of technology. The access available to technology that activates (or through other means constructs) the spaces we are engaged with, should be the starting point of critique for that space. In other words, the critique of space should be from the context of our body's point of view. A viewer of Wenyon and Gambles' work may eventually seek out another iteration of the book presented in that holographic work in a library, through a store or publisher, or via an online resource such as „Google Books“. Our access to „virtual“ space is not limited to one direction or path. Rather, it is integrated into our society through the digitizing of medical records, government databases, memberships, literature, correspondence, photo albums, and communication networks.

As a strategy, panorama touches on a key issue of the constructed space: the point of view or point of beginning in a space (or of a space). In 1787 panorama challenged the understanding of space through the technology inherent in its format. In 2009 panorama has become normalised, with examples as wide ranging as real estate websites and online maps.

By rendering panorama drawings into concrete images on paper we are clearly able to see that the perception of the panoramas I construct are analog. Not only in the sense that they are printed onto paper, but also because of the way content is read in an analogue fashion. I do not grant the viewer of my work access to virtual space via a screen, but I do ask them to construct the space for themselves using the *content* and *context* of the work. I ask them to consider the sensibility of a constructed *panoramic* digital image in a concrete practice.

However, where the purpose of the panorama in the 1800s was largely about recreating the horizon line with the context of a human scale, (or a human viewable scale), the panoramas I construct in my practice disregard a true mathematical perspective. Because the image does not adhere to the perspective we expect, and because often the composite images include completely different perspectives altogether, the task becomes not to survey a scene but to try to unpick its construction; to locate the „real“ components. This process of figuring assists the negotiation of the image within the territory of constructed rather than represented or captured space.

The form of contemporary panorama, found in virtualised environments (such as Char Davies's *Osmose* or *Emsphère*) and in artistic practice responding to technology (such as

Wenyon and Gamble), has dismissed space that relies on mathematical perspective in favour of a space that manages different surfaces of content.

Panorama, as a strategy with which to draw space (augmented by technologies of a camera), creates conflict. While constructing panorama emphasises the process of seamlessly structuring information, constructing drawing is a process whereby the artist interprets information and reveals structure. Within my own practice drawing is an exercise in responding to my body in space, while panorama becomes largely about representing the content of a space within layers of artificial dimensionality.

With the image below you will observe there are multiple horizons and multiple vanishing points. These multiple horizons and points are captured within images that delineate the space, (such as drawings present in the space,) and within the format of panorama, which combines multiple images points of view and merges them so that they connect even if they continue to function with a degree of independence within their original context. In this way it can be seen that one of the key functions of panorama is to join different contexts.



Figure 24: Giraffe and Wall. Panoramic Sketch. Frances Denton, 2009.

My own practice has used a panoramic strategy in order to delve into connected contexts, such as the context of everyday space and the augmentation available through technology. Panorama has proven, in this respect, to be a self-fulfilling prophesy. I set out to discuss how augmented constructed or „virtual“ space was arrived at through the use of technology, and

discovered that my practice was functioning to augment and construct space through the use of panoramic technology.

The image above constructs a space which has a fractured perspective and engages with the concepts of form, body, technology, a „body of work“ and a „point of view“. The concepts of fracture, body, identity, objects of technology, practice, and an engagement with language, have been instrumental to resolving the body of work presented throughout this document and for examination.

Within this image and within the other images I have discussed and shown it is apparent that these ideas, concepts and frameworks have been manifest in the construction, as well as the critique of each, with varying degrees of application. The earlier work included in this document for the purposes of discussion shows the journey towards the construction of strategies applied in later work. The strategy of panorama within a practice of drawing is of individual interest because its development was predominantly marked throughout the two year period of practice included in this Masters program.

Conclusion

Panorama can be discussed both as a strategy and an object of technology. The many variations of approach we can take to panorama are analogies for the approaches that can be taken with regard to identifying ourselves as residents of an augmented virtual space, a constructed space, or space that, through objects of technology is activated in unconventional, (or more personally tailored) ways.

Fei and Davies, rather than projecting new spaces into a realm of unreal encounter, utilise very personal strategies to create new space within our everyday. While this new space borrows the language and the tools of high-end technology in some of their pieces, such as „Osmost“ and Emphère (Davies) they also utilise the languages of performance and masquerade in „Cosplayers“ (Fei, 2004), as well as the language of drawing found within „Glass Jar and Mirror“ (Davies 1985). These „virtual“ spaces are rendered „virtual“ by association with these languages, and with the process of fracture. It is not apparent that the process of distribution across servers and software that Carr would define as virtualised is always the case within these artists work, nor always at the core purpose of the artwork.

In other words, „virtual“ space is used in practices (such as Davies and Fei) to discuss identity because it can stimulate ideas of containment, as well as how a point of view can

change a space. The value of critique of virtual space in this way is the personal, engaged, and embodied context we find ourselves in afterwards.

The point of view that is needed within an urban and technology driven environment is one that puts an emphasis on the individuals and communities that inhabit it. The point of view as a point of beginning is intrinsic to retaining a clear and concrete set of priorities.

Technology that connects fracture is not hugely new. Rules of language connects the fracture of emphasis and context, the postal system connects the fracture of geography, and internet technology connects the fracture of home and public spaces or replaces an answering machine with many separate components connected, constructed and served to a user through a copper wire or fibre optic connection. All these connections are meaningless without a person to speak, to use a postal system or to check their voice mail.

While „virtual“ space is constructed through objects of technology and unlocked via language, the form of identity is located in the point of view and the ideas of the space we bring individually or collectively within practice. Just as in many other spaces and via technology the construction of form is done with many pieces to construct a whole. Virtual and constructed spaces are embodied spaces that we understand via our body, identity and the tangible form we generate through practice, objects and language.

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Declaration of Originality

Student ID: 02246309

Surname: Denton

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Paper Number: 213.800 (5803 MFA)

Paper Title: Master of Fine Arts

Assignment Title: The Form of Identity in Virtual Space

Declaration

- I declare that this is an original assignment and is entirely my own work.
- Where I have made use of the ideas of other writers, I have acknowledged (referenced) the sources in every instance.
- Where I have made use of any diagrams or visuals I have acknowledged (referenced) the source in every instance.
- This assignment has been prepared exclusively for this paper and has not been and will not be submitted as assessed work in any other academic courses.
- I am aware of the penalties for plagiarism as laid down by Massey University.
- A copy of the Assessment Rules and Examination Regulations can be found under the Statutes and Regulations section on the Massey University Website (<http://calendar.massey.ac.nz>).

Student Signature:

Date: