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[や](#) [ゆ](#) [よ](#) [ら](#) [り](#) [る](#) [れ](#) [ろ](#) [わ](#) [ゐ](#) [ゑ](#) [を](#) [ん](#)[top](#) / [一覧に戻る](#) / Handbook for Rapid Travelers - 'Avatar'

Handbook for Rapid Travelers - 'Avatar'

RHIZOME DIGEST: December 4, 1998に掲載された「Handbook for Rapid Travelers - 'Avatar」の全文

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From: Ron Wakkary (rwakkary@stadiumweb.com) Subject: Handbook for Rapid Travelers - 'Avatar'

Handbook for Rapid Travelers - 'Avatar'

There is a danger in travelling to a new place and feeling compelled to create closure for that experience. The process may begin in small ways, like finding specific connections between events, people, and the words they speak, but before long you are generalizing and supporting these generalizations with an ill-mixture of informed and uninformed thinking. You may even appropriate small aspects of the place by collecting souvenirs to be shown to others. In my recent visit to Stockholm, I did not fail to do this, however, my tourism found affinity in the exhibition 'Avatar'. Individually, this process may round out one's interpretation into a more cogent and recognizable reality, at least for oneself. However, with 'Avatar', this process is engaged at the level of an institution - here, the travel is more treacherous, the tourism is less benign and the appropriation is very real.

'Avatar's' inaugural installation was at the Moderna Museet URL(<http://www.modernamuseet.se>) and coincided with the reopening of the museum in its new building by the architect Ralph Meneo and the opening of the blockbuster 'Miro' exhibition. 'Avatar' was curated by Ulrika Sten of Riksst Allningar

URL(<http://www.riksutstallningar.se>), the organization that produced the exhibition and will subsequently travel it through Scandanavia.

On the one hand, 'Avatar' is benignly conservative and this could be overlooked in favor of welcoming the efforts of an institution like the Moderna Museet to host an exhibition of media art other than video. On the other hand, 'Avatar' is a conservativist strategy to utilize media art and media art discourse to further maintain a status quo model for exhibiting art. What is fundamentally at fault with 'Avatar', is that in the process of representing the emerging practice of media art it severs this practice from its contextual ground - a ground that is as emerging as the practice itself but nonetheless evident as a new model for contextualizing and disseminating art.

The new model or contextual ground could be described as the 'network model'. 'Avatar' attempts to extract media art from its inherent context, the network and reposition it within a traditional context, the museum. The 'museum model' is at the core of most museum's identity and practice today. The 'museum model' is vertically structured. In the verticality of the 'museum model', all artistic and curatorial energies are directed upwards to a pinnacle moment. This moment is then frozen and made manifest in an exhibition within a contained space for a defined period. The horizontally structured 'network model' is contra-museum. It is not frozen but fluid and characterized by varying duration and shifts. The art work is unavoidably context-sensitive within the 'network model'. It often relies on the interchange of a community of 'users' or is integrated within the context and shifts as the context itself invariably shifts. The 'space' in the 'network model' is not contained but wide and branching. It is composed of nodes, and sites, and the active spaces in between. The beginning and end points of the creative process in the 'network model' are more open and one could expect a significant instance of an art work at any time.

The curator of 'Avatar', Ulrike Sten is right in placing the concept of avatar within current media practice. She rightly finds continuity between the historical origins of the term avatar in Hinduism and today's update in media and internet-based usage. However, she fails to adequately explain why such a continuity exists, other than it perhaps being an historical accident. On closer analysis, the continuity stems from the understanding that the concept of avatar presupposes a network. In media, the avatar exists as an interface between at least two individuals, like nicknames or images in a chat environment. More essential to the concept of avatar is that it provides a multiple and distributed presence or agency that can only exist in a non-centralized network. In the pantheistic religion of Hinduism, a god could appear simultaneously in multiple places in

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multiple forms, each form acting independently. If you like, in Hinduism the relationship of the realms of gods and humans are networked and distributive in concept. Vishnu could appear in any form in the human realm without ever 'leaving' the realm of the gods.

The connection between Hinduism and recent media in regard to the idea of avatar could not be explained in these terms by Sten, because of her insistence on denying the 'network model' and insisting upon the 'museum model'. This insistence, by extension, protects the interests of the museum. That curatorial actions appear here as conspiratorial may seem beyond proportionality - but the brilliant conceptual performance by artist Karin Hansson laid this clash of 'aesthetic theories' and underlying political interests bare. Hansson was an original participant in the exhibition. She is a member of the 'syndicalistic union' (a workers union), and she had sent her union representative to a preparatory meeting for 'Avatar' attended by the curator and artists. The curator's response was to remove her from the exhibition. The art work was clearly rendered 'invalid' within the 'museum model'. Within the 'network model' the art work exists and is effective for its ability to 'spread' beyond the contained boundaries of the exhibition and critique the underlying concepts from the margins. In the 'network model' Vishnu can appear at any time at any place.

Coincidentally, an example of a network based approach to exhibiting was on view concurrently with 'Avatar' in 'Arkipelag'. This project was organized by Hans Ulrich Obrist and David Neumann of Magazine 3. 'Arkipelag' was the clearest response to the selection of Stockholm as European Cultural Capital for 1998. The project involved seven museums (not including the Moderna museet), a television channel and several other venues in Stockholm. The duration of the project was year long and had several 'phases', each with a different set of curators, artists and exhibitions at different venues. It's hard to imagine another city progressive enough for such a high level of institutional cooperation for the sake of contemporary art or progressive enough to understand and embrace a 'network model' approach. Yet this wasn't without a price and ironically enough, its own example of institutional disdain. Photographs by artist Donald Mader, were destroyed by 'nazi youths' at the thinly veiled invitation of the Historiska museet director, the venue for this 'Arkipelag' component, curated by Bjarne Melgaard. The director and others widely spread the interpretation that Mader's work was not 'art' but child pornography.

Conspicuous in its absence in 'Arkipelag' was the computer network. But it is clear from the examples above of 'Arkipelag' and the avatar in Hinduism that the 'network model' is not restricted to media. However, in media the non-centralized and distributive contextual ground is

almost unavoidable and therefore comes to the fore. In fact, as is more and more understood, the paradigmatic shift caused by recent technology is a conceptual shift that is a re-discovery, or further iteration, of distributive and rhizomatic thinking.

Returning to 'Avatar', it is as one would expect of a product of the 'museum model', an extraordinarily traditional installation. The art works are clearly contained within the confines of the museum. The artists have accepted the physical gallery as a suitable context for their work. Issues of the network, central to a concept of avatar, were absent with the mild exceptions of Asa Anderson and Peter Hagdahl. A kiosk presenting an informational web site of 'Avatar' (www.riksutstallningar.se/avatar) was installed in an antechamber to the gallery showing the idea of the network as supplementary to the gallery installation. The art works are displayed as a collection of self-contained and essentialized objects. Such essentialism is characteristic of the 'museum model' and should be questioned as inimical to network technology and technology-based issues of avatar, and especially foreign to the concept of avatar within Hinduism.

What seems in part after-the-fact denial, and in part curatorial strategy, the concept of avatar is recast within such a general view that the concept itself is lost and the title hangs over the show like a malapropism. Sten's text and the catalogue are somewhat less than a Baedeker's account of technology and a weak accounting of the exhibition. Sten confidently constructs a text that unabashedly ignores central issues like the network, communication, community, virtuality, dynamic representation, temporality and duration. Like a travelogue essay, fragmentary 'facts and interpretations' are generalized and assembled without questioning or discussing any underlying connections between them. The very ideas that problematize the 'museum model' are generalized beyond critical use. (with the exception of supplementary writing by Astrid Trotzig, who alone tries to address the artists' work within the curatorial premise). Sten's text begins with the benign notion that the '[Avatar] artists are all interested in some way in the new technology and its consequences' and ends with her offering four symbols each imaged in the catalogue, that represent the 'spheres' that 'Avatar involves': a hard disk, a brain, the Sega character 'Sonic' and an image of Vishnu.

Independent of 'Avatar' and its lack of critical context, the artists for the most part attempt to engage media and media technology and at least, operate at the more abstracted edges of the notion of avatar. Mariko Mori's contribution is a four meter wide concave photograph of a performance in the London Docklands that incorporates a body capsule. The sculptures of SODA, a British group that straddles commercial and art-based enterprises contributed INSTALLATION

2743, a flat update on kinetic art consisting of several self-collapsing minimal wall structures. Cecilia Parsberg's THE DOMINATRIX is a two-channel video installation of an interview by Clara Mannheimer with Mistress Josephine and a session with the Dominatrix. In addition to the videos, the work MODEL OF POWER, composed of a series of adult tandem 'bouncy balls', is interspersed with the video monitors.

Peter Hagdahl's UNDER INFLUENCE FLOW CHART is a local network of computers, sensors and video displays. The web of devices occupies a corner of the gallery and the viewer is unavoidably drawn in, becoming a triggering device within this system of seemingly unrelated actions. The presence of one or more participants cascades through the system simultaneously altering at least three projected images, a graph, a web page and a geometric image. This work is the most technically ambitious and in an allegorical sense, more all encompassing than the other works, however, Hagdahl seems to willingly partake in a technical formalism that obscures the specifics and the processes of the work as opposed to revealing them. The video displays were for the most part in the monochrome green of early workstations. This belies a kind of technical nostalgia for an appearance that is more 'technical' than our current graphical-user-interfaces. The work is accompanied by flowcharts of the network revealing the various cpus, protocols, ports and programming structures combined in ways we would not expect. In large part, it is Hagdahl's aim to create an abstract model for a technical system that ignores accepted technical and conceptual boundaries in order to create a working analogy for social processes that are currently undergoing change. Processes in which correlating legal, social, and cultural distinctions and boundaries are ignored or hybridized in unintended ways. For example, multiplicity of identity exists for us all through computer networks. A single action like submitting a form on the internet will have a cascading and multiplying affect on our identity and representation, most of which we are unaware of, and is certainly not in our control. Moreover, the agent or ad hoc consortium of agents in control will more than not be purely technological and data driven - an information chain reaction that formulates identities beyond anybody's control or aim.

Asa Andersson's GATEWAY is a large, approximately eight foot by four foot glass that stands on the gallery floor. Pressing a hand on the glass is sensed by one of the many sensors surrounding the pane and triggers one of many spoken phrases. Multiple voices can be triggered by placing hands at multiple places on the glass. GATEWAY delves into poltergeist phenomena and computer technology. At least dating back to the 19th century there emerges a consumer's anxiety over new technology. There is a point when there is an excess of knowledge beyond the level a consumer needs to know to utilize the

technology. Within this fear of excess the anxiety grows. For example, Victor Hugo did not want his photograph taken thinking a layer of his soul would be lost, the mania during the 70s to play vinyl records backward to hear the devil, and the many phenomena photographs or video that reveal aliens or poltergeist that Andersson herself is interested in.

One of the more compelling works that was able to draw on the generalized concept of the exhibition and the idea that the origin of the term avatar is Hindu, was Carl Michael von Hausswolff. His contribution, AVATARICA 1-20, is a series of photographs taken by his twelve-year-old daughter of the Kumbha Mela in Hardwar. The Kumbha Mela is a Hindu festival that occurs every twelve years, involving a pilgrimage of several months occurring in four locales of which Hardwar is one of the most important. Pilgrims bathe in the Ganges to cleanse themselves and their ancestors of evil deeds - it is believed that the gods' life elixir was preserved in a crucible and that in attempts by demons to steal the crucible drops of the elixir fell in the four places of the festival. C.M. von Hausswolff first experienced the Kumbha Mela in 1986 and twelve years later he returned with his twelve year-old-daughter. Prescient here are Dennis Oppenheim drawings with his son Eric, however, the specifics of AVATARICA 1-20 and its simplicity, construct a valence in the idea of agency central to a critical understanding of avatar. Progeny is the development of agency and identity from within a biological model of self-similarity, where, in respect to an avatar, the aim is to experience a realm that you cannot experience. C.M. von Hausswolff finds an 'avatar' in the most obvious and problematic place and articulates an idea of realm in less simple terms, that are temporal and physical, and both familiar and unfamiliar.

CM von Hausswolf's work is able to conceptualize issues of avatar and represent these ideas in a complex form that is absent in the critical structure of the exhibition. The overarching conservatism of 'Avatar' blurred the focus and limited the works and choice of artists. The tourist's view of avatar and media arts is not the real fault of the exhibition, for it was only the starting point and not the strategy. The real fault is that the strategy of 'Avatar' is to appropriate media art and its discourse in order to confirm and not critique its own institutional practice. A practice that is based on a model that presupposes that an exhibition is a collection of self-contained objects and one that foregoes the possibility offered by new art to explore the chance for a new model for exhibiting art based on the network.

Ron Wakkary
New York, New York
1998

Travel dates for Avatar:

98 11 07 - 98 12 06: Gotlands Konstmuseum, Visby 98 12 17 - 99 02 14: Ronneby Konstf(Jening, Ronneby 99 05 08 - 99 06 06: Bor (J konstmuseum, Bor 99 08 21 - 99 09 19: Sundsvalls Museum, Sundsvall 99 10 02 - 99 10 31: Konstens Hus, Lule(J 99 11 18 - 99 12 19: Stenersenmuseet, Oslo kommune, Kunstsamlingerne, Oslo

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ITEMS OF INTEREST in the cafe, at random:

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