

All Property is Theft (1): RMB City, Synthetic Worlds and Real Estate

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In current discussions about Synthetic Worlds, ‘Second Life’ (SL) is the popular choice.⁽²⁾ But rather than representing an escape from the problems of ‘First Life’, SL continues longstanding debates over the erosion of the public domain and related concerns over privacy, copyright and security. Perhaps there is nothing surprising here as the issue of property remains at the core of politics reconfigured for the various kinds of worlds we inhabit. Although residents themselves create the synthetic world of SL, relations of property are created too, as synthetically as in first life:

‘And yet while we create these new worlds, we do not possess them. That which we create is mortgaged to others, and to the interests of others, to states and corporations who control the means for making worlds we alone discover.’⁽³⁾

The construction and development of Cao Fei’s RMB City resonates with such descriptions and cyberpunk fantasies.⁽⁴⁾ In the three-dimensional online virtual world of SL, RMB City is a virtual metropolis reflecting China’s urban development and the shift from agrarianism. It materializes some of the contradictions over the virtual economy, virtual land and virtual real estate market. The wider context of SL and its video game scenario also extends the global casino of financial markets and the issue of property relations more broadly. Although registering an account and entry is free, to own land residents pay a monthly fee in US dollars and can then resell it or simply use it for any purpose within the SL terms of service.⁽⁵⁾ There are also private estates that have a completely separate set of regulations where the owner retains control like a feudal landlord.⁽⁶⁾ Above and beyond this Linden Lab retain sovereignty and can terminate a user’s account at any time:

‘Linden Lab has the right at any time for any reason or no reason to suspend or terminate your Account, terminate this Agreement, and/or refuse any and all current or future use of the Service without notice or liability to you. In the event that Linden Lab suspends or terminates your Account or this Agreement, you understand and agree that you shall receive no refund or exchange for any unused time on a subscription, any license or subscription fees, any content or data associated with your Account, or for anything else.’⁽⁷⁾

¹ This is a quote from *The Communist Manifesto*, full text available from <http://www.anti-thesis.net/contents/projects/archive/manifesto/manifesto.pdf>

² Second Life (<http://secondlife.com/>) is an American Internet-based virtual world video game launched in 2003, developed by Linden Research, Inc (commonly referred to as Linden Lab). In China, a similar world, HiPiHi (<http://www.hipihi.com/>) was founded in 2005.

³ McKenzie Wark (2001), *Hacker Manifesto 2.0*, http://www.feelergauge.net/projects/hackermanifesto/version_2.0/

⁴ ‘Metaverse’ is the most well-known of these, from Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992).

⁵ Prices of SL virtual land can be found at <http://secondlife.com/land/pricing.php> - subject to the LindeX that regulates the exchange rate of Linden dollars.

⁶ See Wikipedia for a more detailed description of the virtual economy and real estate:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life

⁷ Terms of Service (item 2.6), <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>

A closer look at the terms of service agreements confirms how ownership is carefully managed through virtual participation. One of the contradictions is that SL facilitates a virtual commons, but does so through proprietary principles in keeping with virtual capitalism. There are a number of examples of creative works that try to make such contingencies transparent, such as Linda Hilfling's *Participation 0.0 – Part 1* (2007) that documents an intervention where the terms of the service were published on 112 billboards within the world. The intervention ends when she is expelled from a landowner's private property.(8)

Such an example serves to emphasise how SL is founded upon the logic of intellectual property as well as the older logic of enclosure. While the idea of the 'commons'(9) is generally taken to oppose private property, SL is a really good example of how in practice the concept has been appropriated.(10) The parallel with 'enclosure', at the end of the 18th century in the UK, is evoked where open land was fenced off and entitled to private owners. Landowners used the legislative framework at the time to appropriate common land for private profit. The history of this is well versed in that the landless working classes in turn provided the labour force of the industrial revolution. What was inherently held in common was stolen – land, labour, desire, subjectivity – through privatization. If data, like land (or indeed the human genome), begins to define the public realm, that this might be privately owned remains a perversity. As property rights have been extended from land to capital to information, clear parallels exist to how issues of class and property flow from the commodification of information.

RMB city can be understood in this context, emerging out of the broader contradictions of informational capitalism, China's version of free market state capitalism, as well as the perverse economy of the art market in general. Working in a conceptual tradition, the artist Cao Fei becomes a developer as part of a two year durational performative artwork in which residents produce the work. The figure of the participant-resident is at the centre of this but only in as much as they contribute to the creation of the worlds they inhabit and are consumed within. Residents re-enact the virtuality of their first lives and the property relations bound up with the production of virtual sociality, virtual real estate, and the globalised art world where developers and cultural agencies work ever more closely in urban regeneration schemes.

In RMB City, 'units' are sold to collectors/investors and they are granted free access to develop their own events and cultural activities. The publicity material reads: 'A

⁸ A longer description of *Participation 0.0* (2007) can be found at:
<http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/projects/2008/antisocial/view.php?id=9>

The documentation can be viewed at:

<http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/dump/antisocial/participation/index.html>

The use of irony is also prevalent, such as the re-enactment of 9/11, xDxD_attack,

<http://odysseyart.ning.com/photo/photo/show?id=685033%3APhoto%3A7081&context=user>

⁹ By 'commons', I am referring to resources shared within a community.

¹⁰ The political project of the Diggers and Levellers is evoked as defenders of the commons, and their attempt at 'levelling' property. Matthew Fuller's project *Digger Barley* (2007-08) is a distribution of seeds from St Georges's Hill in Surrey, UK, the first of several common land sites occupied and farmed by the Diggers proposing to 'make the earth a common treasury for all' (in 1649). More information can be found at <http://www.spc.org/fuller/projects/digger-barley/>

Great Real Estate Opportunity in Second Life; A Unique Investment Possibility in First Life.' Specific instructions are provided for investors, and the issues of ownership and accreditation are carefully managed by Cao Fei and Vitamin Creative Space.(11) The units are characterised by well-known icons of old China and its new flourishing economy. In preparation, China Tracy (aka Cao Fei) describes these as 'a series of new Chinese fantasy realms that are highly self-contradictory, inter-permeative, laden with irony and suspicion, and extremely entertaining and pan-political. China's current obsession with land development in all its intensity will be extended to Second Life. A rough hybrid of communism, socialism and capitalism, RMB City will be realized in a globalized digital sphere combining overabundant symbols of Chinese reality with cursory imaginings of the country's future.'(12)

Every named symbol notionally belongs to the 'people' – the People's Palace, People's Factory, People's Music Plaza, and so on - yet, ownership is ambiguous given the broader sovereignty of the state and Linden labs. The investment opportunity reflects the confusion of communism, socialism and capitalism that China encapsulates. The investment in this artwork is virtual too, in parallel to the ways in which information and communication dominate the process of production and the social relations that derive from this. The trick, or game, of synthetic worlds is to offer the promise of participation but through centralised ownership and control where the web platform itself mediates relations.(13) The socio-technical structure of server-client relations illustrate the point that control remains centralized despite external appearances. Is SL just another example of capital recuperating the democratic potential of a technology?(14)

In keeping with the wider discussions of network power, the willing subjectivity of the SL resident is crucially involved in the process. As the market outsources manufacture to its consumers to create their own worlds, Maurizio Lazzarato explains the logic:

'The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control (for the reproduction of mercantile relationships) and becomes directly productive, because the goal of our postindustrial society is to construct the consumer/communicator – and to construct it as "active". [...] The fact that immaterial labor produces subjectivity and economic value at the same time demonstrates how capital has broken down all the oppositions among economy, power, and knowledge.'(15)

That residents actively create their own worlds in social networking platforms like SL is an expression of new forms of control over subjectivity. Residents voluntarily

¹¹ For instance, RMB City is launched under a Creative Commons License, <http://creativecommons.org>, but at the same time it is clear that this is an artwork by Cao Fei and that 'collectors/investors' are just that, and not participating artists.

¹² Quoted from the RMB City publication, in the section 'RMB City - Online Urbanization'.

¹³ This is the issue that Arnolfini's *Antisocial Networking* explores, see <http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/antisocial/>

¹⁴ See Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick, in 'Info-Enclosure 2.0', *Web 2.0: Man's Best Friendster?*, Mute vol. 2 #4 (January 2007), <http://www.metamute.org/Web-2.0-Mans-bestfriendster/>

¹⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Immaterial Labour', trans. Paul Colilli & Ed Emory, in Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) p. 142.

create themselves and their worlds, but in compromised form where democratic freedom seems to simply constitute the ability to own property. It is under these ideological conditions that RMB City's contradictory slogan 'My City is Yours, Your City is Mine' begins to make sense and highlights the city as a political and contested space. In this way RMB City represents the shift from antagonisms associated with land ownership, to the production of objects, to the informational economy where intellectual property becomes the key issue, and in turn to the realm of synthetic property.⁽¹⁶⁾ That synthetic property is expressed in disputes over virtual land and real estate is a further irony that emphasizes how public property continues to be appropriated.

¹⁶ By 'synthetic property', I am suggesting a further transition from intellectual property, similar to what Florian Schneider calls 'imaginary property' - a phrase used in the project description of *The Museum of the Stealing of Souls*, <http://www.stealingsouls.org/> - see also Florian Schneider's 'A Matter of Theft: Notes on the Art of Stealing a Soul' (2008), <http://roundtable.kein.org/node/798>