The Second Life Artist Project: New Possibilities for Visual Arts Education

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International Art Education Association

InAEA 2nd Biannual Virtual Conference

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Second Life

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Abstract

Imagine if famous artists could help us guide art discussions in the classroom. In *The Second Life Artist Project*, digital avatars for three legendary artists: Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, & Vincent Van Gogh. each respond to three pieces of art by living artists., Those artist avatars model the *Visual Thinking Strategy*, or *VTS,* to discuss selected art work in the *Second Life* environment, a free 3D world on the Internet. *The Artist Colony* is an idyllic sea side learning space created in *Second Life* especially for the project. The objective was to create an extraordinary new possibility for authentic communication in visual arts education through alternate identities within a *Relational Aesthetics* theoretical context.

We designed our research to provide a new twist on Metropolitan Museum of Art's online series, *The Artist Project – What Artists See When They Look at the Met*. There, contemporary artists responded to selected objects in the museum. We re-imagined this process in the opposite, so that avatars of historical artists commented on contemporary art in a virtual artist colony. Using *Relational Aesthetics* methodology, we invited participants to create their own avatars and select their own artists and art works to join us in *The Artist Colony* in *Second Life*.

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Just imagine if famous artists could help us guide art discussions in the classroom. In *The Second Life Artist Project*, digital avatars for three legendary artists: Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, & Vincent Van Gogh, each respond to three artworks by living artists. The action takes places in a unique virtual seaside space, *The Artist Colony*, created in *Second Life* especially for our project. Presented as an opportunity for continuing collaboration, our project focuses on issues of *Relational Aesthetics*, Co-presence, avatar creation and identity to foster conversation and learning within a virtual world environment.

We designed our research to provide a new twist on Metropolitan Museum of Art's online series, *The Artist Project – What Artists See When They Look at the Met*. In that project, contemporary artists respond to selected objects in the museum's collection. We re-imagine it in the opposite, so that avatars of historical artists comment on contemporary art in a virtual *Artist Colony* using the *VTS* or *Visual Thinking Strategy*. The *VTS* method, originated by Harvard researchers, Abigail Housen and Phillip Yenawine is currently used in hundreds of museums and schools worldwide. With the objective of encouraging open, authentic engagement with art works, the viewer is asked to respond to three basic questions:

- What's going on in this picture?

- What do you see that makes you say that?

- What more can you say?

For our research, we situated the *VTS* method within the larger philosophical methodology of *Relational Aesthetics*. Nicolas Bourriaud explains that *Relational Aesthetics* involves social exchange, interactivity with the viewer, and linking individuals and groups together. To operationalize that perspective, we invited open participation in *The Second Life Artist Project*, asking that interested participants create their own avatars of famous artists to join us in discussing contemporary art pieces at our *Artist Colony* in the *Second Life* virtual world.

Figure 1. Julian Crooks, The Artist Colony Beach House in *Second Life*

As a virtual world on the Internet, *The Artist Colony* provides the perfect venue for the

SL avatars to navigate and interact within an illusory 3D environment. It engages the

researchers and potential participants in Co-Presence where the synchronous

communication among individuals is mediated by the computer. The project is

documented by a machinima, or *Second Life* machine cinema, that is available on

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbXqjVdLDpE&t=3s

The avatars for the researchers, June Julian, (Junie Mirabella), and Julian Crooks, (Jules

McWhinnie,) interact with the artist avatars and guide them through the *VTS* questions.

Figure 2. Junie Mirabella, avatar for June Julian

Figure 3. Jules McWhinnie, avatar for Julian Crooks

Jules McWhinnie interviewed Georgia O'Keeffe about *The Skull*, a painting by Andy Warhol. As she sits on a stool in *The Artist Colony* virtual space and views the painting on an easel in front of her, the famous New Mexico artist replies to the *VTS* questions and describes how she also painted skulls.

Figure 4. Georgia O'Keeffe responding to Andy Warhol's, *Skull*

Junie Mirabella engaged Vincent Van Gogh in a conversation while looking at *Steine*, a painting by the New Leipzig artist, Uwe Kowski. Answering the VTS questions one by one, Vincent Van Gogh said that he responded to the warmth and intense colors of the Kowski painting, and compared them to his own work.

Figure 5. Junie Mirabella and Vincent Van Gogh discussing *Steine*

Then, Vincent Van Gogh, himself, asked Frida Kahlo to describe what she saw in June

Julian's recent painting, *The Desiccating Mermaid*. Gesturing at the canvas in front of

her, she replies that the angst that she experiences while looking at the painting reminds

her of her own self-portraits.

Figure 6. Frida Kahlo speaking about June Julian's *Desiccating Mermaid*

All three of the of the historical artists' avatars participated fully in the steps of the VTS

method for discussing art works, modelling that technique for others to follow. Presented

as an opportunity for continuing collaboration, our project focused on issues of

Relational Aesthetics, Co-Presence, avatar creation and alternative identities to foster

learning. Within the *Relational Aesthetics* theoretical context, we invited participants to

further develop the project by creating their own famous artist avatars in their choice of

media and to join the VTS conversation in the Artist Colony. So, what would Cindy

Sherman do?

Figure 7. Georgia O'Keeffe and her avatar

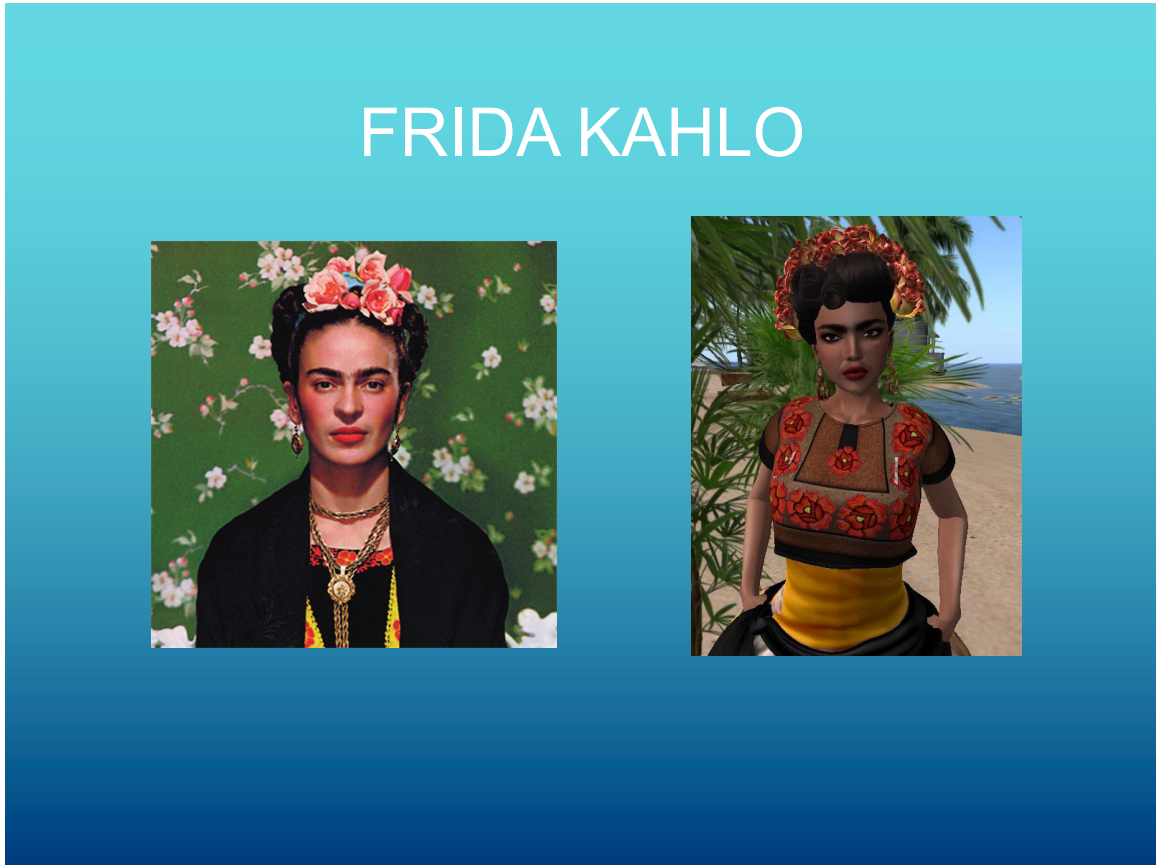Figure 8. Vincent Van Gogh and his avatar

Figure 9. Frida Kahlo and her avatar

Note: Julian G. Crooks created *The Artist Colony* in Second Life, and all the authors' and artists' avatars especially for this research project.

The voice of Vincent Van Gogh was Rodrick B. MacLennan

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