

Xiaofei Mo

RMB City: A Second Life-Based Project by Cao Fei

Artist's Biography

Cao Fei (born in 1978, Guangzhou) has started to produce video and theatrical works before she graduated from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art in 2001. Ever since then Cao has been focusing a lot on the everyday life of



different people in relation to urbanism, in the context of Chinese society nowadays that changes rapidly and radically. For example, she cooperated with Ou Ning in a 2003 documentary project, *San Yuan Li* (45 minutes, black and white), a historical village on the outskirts of Guangzhou that was once the site of the outbreak of First Opium War and now trapped by skyscrapers, in which villagers whose ancestors have been living there from generation to generation engaging in agricultural mode of production reinvent their lifestyle and become vendors of pirated DVDs, shoe polishers and so on. In 2004, Cao traces the everyday life of Chinese young people who are fascinated by the Japanese subculture of costume play in *COSPlayers* (eight-minute video along with a related series of photographs). They dress themselves in exaggerated robes or metallic capes as the anime characters they like, and imagine that they own the magical power while wielding those “toy-weapons” in the street. However, the background behind them is the city landscape, which is full of site-constructions. The surreal individual utopia is bridged

with the real social utopia in this spectacular way. In the end of the film, each of the heroic dreamers returns home where they come back to the mundane life just like everybody else. In the multi-media staged performance *PRD Anti-Heroes* (PRD: Pearl River Delta) premiered in 2005, a history of the anonymous is constructed in the visual form of traditional Canton opera, “using documentary style interviews, anecdotes, local legends culled on the Internet, widely publicized press reports of goings-on in the Delta’s hot spots, and other first-person accounts of life in this sub-tropical urban sprawl”¹. As the title suggests, Cao is interested in a collage of the non-heroes who might reflect perfectly “the situation of a society moving at a speed beyond local planners’ control”², even though they are never part of the official documents. Deeply rooted in the reality of Chinese society and the culture of present times, Cao’s specific angle has soon earned her international attention in the contemporary art world. Her works have been widely exhibited since 2001 in biennials (Berlin, Gwangju, Venice, Sydney, Shanghai, Yokohama, etc.) as well as art institutions such as P.S.1, Pompidou and Guggenheim among others, and she is one of the six finalists for the Hugo Boss Prize 2010., Cao Fei is now based in Beijing and represented by Vitamin Creative Space (Guangzhou, Beijing) and Lombard-Freid Projects (New York).

Artist’s Working Method

In terms of realization of the project in *Second Life*, Cao Fei first created the sculpties of RMB City using the modeling program 3ds Max on her computer, then hired the

¹ <http://www.caofei.com/projects/prd/>

² <http://www.caofei.com/projects/prd/>

metaverse developers such as Avatrian and Sine Wave for in-world fabrication, event facilitation and animation production. Greatly supported by Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la Création, Shiseido, Ullens Cneter for Contemporary Art, and especially Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador to China and now one of the most important collectors of Chinese contemporary art, *RMB City* has been continuously constructed, reshaped and eventually evolved into a laboratory fusing all kinds of creative sources ranging from politics to social economics, from theatre to moving image, from reality to virtuality, and from architecture to urban planning. As said by Hu Fang, artistic director of Vitamin Creative Space, *RMB City* “constitutes a contemporary, virtual version of the museum or theater; but at the same time it is itself the work that hangs on the wall or that flickers across the screen”³. Not only the structure but also the content of the work constantly alters the boundary between the virtual and the real in a playful way. For instance, the video *Live in RMB City* produced in 2009 features China Tracy’s newborn avatar China Sun, while Cao Fei has just given birth to her son.



<http://rmbcity.com/2009/10/shiseido-gallery-solo-exhibition/>

³ <http://vitamincreativespace.com/en/project/viewProject.do?id=59>

Exhibition History

RMB City is a virtual community based in Second Life, which was first showcased in the Chinese Pavilion (curated by Hou Hanru) of the 52nd Venice Biennale 2007, as a film series titled *I Mirror Trilogy* that documents the adventure of China Tracy (Second Life)/Cao Fei (Real Life), and is officially launched at the Serpentine Gallery in London in collaboration with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist since July 2008, where the construction progress was shown in 2D and 3D models, as well as in the computer viewing platform of the virtual site. Once the process was completed, various institutions, artists and collectors would host activities in the “city” open to all Second Life users for a period of two years.

Selected Exhibitions

May 12th – Aug 1 2010, 17th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney

Feb 12 - Apr 28, 2010, "Contemplating the Void", Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Jan 22 - Apr 11, 2010, "Utopia Matters: From Brotherhoods to Bauhaus", Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin

Dec 14 2009-Feb 7, 2010, "NO LAB on Tour", ACA Gallery, Savannah College of Art & Design (SCAD), Atlanta

Nov 25 - Dec 19, 2009, "Timelapse", The National Art Museum of China (NAMOC), Beijing

Nov 17, 2009-Feb 28, 2010, "Breaking Forecast, 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation of Artists", Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing

Nov 7, 2009, "RMB City Opera" (world premiere performance), Artissima 2009, Torino, Italy

Oct 26 - Dec 20, 2009, "Cao Fei" (solo exhibition), Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

Oct 2, 2009-Jan 9, 2010, "Dress Codes: The 3rd ICP Triennial of Photography and Video", International Center of Photography, New York

Sep 10 – Oct 10, 2009, "The Girl Effect", Lombard-Freid Projects, New York

Aug 30 - Oct 25, 2009, Utopics: 11th Swiss Sculpture Exhibition, Bienne/Biel Switzerland

June 10-14, 2009, Art 40 Basel, Switzerland

May 22 - Aug 9 2009, "Louis Vuitton: A Passion for Creation", Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong

April 2009, "Alternate Realities", Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

March 3, 2009 - September 6, 2009, H BOX, Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA), Newport Beach, USA

March - December 2009, Reinstallation: "Cao Fei: RMB City", Serpentine Gallery, London

Feb 13-21, 2009, 'Performatik 09', Kaaithatre Festival, Brussels, Belgium

October 17, 2008, Frieze Art Fair, London, UK

September 10, 2008, "Play With Your Triennale", Yokohama Triennale, Yokohama, Japan

March 13, 2008, Le Plateau, Paris, France

December 8, 2007, Shenzhen & Hong Kong Bi-city of Urbanism and Architecture Biennale, Shenzhen, China & Hong Kong

December 6, 2007, Art Basel Miami Beach, Miami, USA

September 8, 2007, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway

The 10th Istanbul Biennale, Istanbul, Turkey

June 10, 2007, The 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy



Installation view of RMB City at the Serpentine Gallery in London

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/vintfalken/3264071904/in/set-72157606371375645/>



Installation view of Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2007

<http://www.lombard-freid.com/home.htm>

Composition and Display

As a two-year project, RMB City is a plural process that cannot be easily defined and goes beyond a game-based or internet-based artwork. In general, the work is constituted of three parts: a public platform composed of virtual objects based on Second Life; a series of events happening in Second Life in cooperation with different individuals and organizations; and products derived from these events in the Real-Life forms of videos, digital prints and theatrical performance. Because of the complex composition of RMB City, the display mode varies from time to time and so does the experience for spectators. For instance, computer terminals were used for audience to access *RMB City* in Second Life when exhibited in "Dress Codes: The 3rd ICP Triennial of Photography and Video" at International Center of Photography, New York; while in Artissima 2009 (Italy), the staged performance *RMB City Opera* was shown with audience seated in a theatre.

Objects of the Platform

China Tracy/Cao Fei talks about "mirroring city" in the *City Manifesto*, "RMB City is not a city of magical mirror, it doesn't restore the full present, nor does it recall our reminiscence of the past. It's a mirror that partially reflects; we see where we were coming from, discover some of the 'connections' that fill the pale zone between the real and the virtual, the clues of which get disturbed, enriched, and polished. New orders are born, so are new, strange wisdom."⁴ Most of the objects in RMB City are playful fantasies that parody the prototypes in Real Life. For example, the national flag of China, red with five yellow stars, is transformed into People's Music Plaza floating in the sky;

⁴ <http://rmbcity.com/about/city-manifesto/>

and the standardized symbol of Mao Zedong waving hand is renamed People's Patron Saint; and the newly completed Beijing National Stadium "Bird's Nest" has already become rusty. Following are the major objects constructed in RMB City:

City Map



City Guide

Southwest



People's Bomb Center



People's Patron Saint



People's Park



People's Slum



People's Tower



People's Shopping Island



People's Big Elephant Center



People's Temple



People's Bank

Southeast



People's Beach



People's Music Plaza

Northeast



People's Community



People's Entertainment Television



People's Pond



People's Wharf



People's Aerial Castle

UCCA
Utah Center for Contemporary Art
(UCCA) is a non-profit, non-representational
and open to all in Salt Lake City
collection. It is located in Salt Lake City
November 2007. UCCA presents
exhibitions of established and
emerging artists and develops a
travel program to their studios.
Through education and research.

www.ucca-center.org

Northwest



People's Observation Wheel



People's Worksite



People's Neo Village



People's Factory



People's Market



People's Waterpark



People's Hall



People's Dam



People's Land



People's Barrier



People's Love Center



People's Palace

Events in Second Life

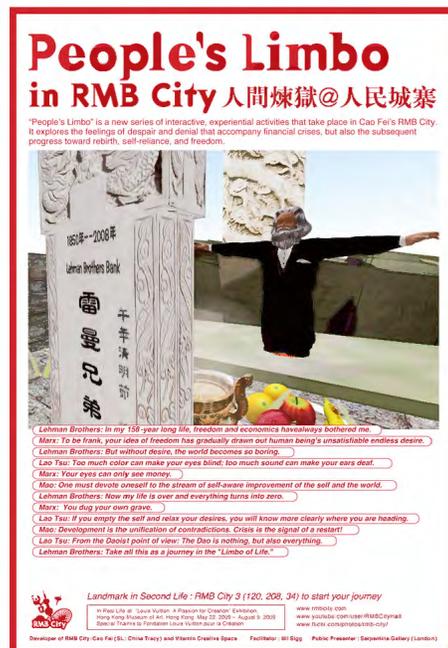
Just like any city in the world, RMB City has its own bureaucratic structure. The City Hall is situated in the Sigg Castle, inside which is the Mayor, each of whom has a three-month term of office. In Real Life, all members of the management team from project coordinator to graphic designer have their Second Life avatars. Ever since the

Groundbreaking Ceremony on July 14, 2008, diverse activities have happened in RMB City. During the Yokohama Triennale 2008, visitors were encouraged to submit their own artistic proposals to be realized in People's Worksite in RMB City during the Triennale period, which is a commission project called "Play With Your Triennale".



Four curators of Yokohama Triennale doing YMCA in RMB City
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/avatrian/2858146832/>

Later for Prospect One New Orleans, Cao Fei and MAP OFFICE collaborated to create NO LAB in RMB City. Rendered by Sinewave, NO LAB is an investigation into the post-Katrina landscape of New Orleans which allows avatars to wander around the black-and-white space, interact with Obama or characters from Waiting for Godot, and experience a virtual hurricane that floods and recedes in cycle. Another project is Huang He's Mater Q's Guide to Virtual Feng Shui. Literally meaning wind and water, Feng Shui is a traditional system that has been used in China for thousands of years to maximize the well-being of residents based on the harmony of the geographical environment; however, it is the "flat" space of the virtual world constructed by pixels that we are concerning this time. When AlanLau Nirvana (Alan Lau in Real Life, a partner with a consulting firm in Hong Kong) was



Poster of People's Limbo
<http://vitamincreativespace.com/en/news/viewNews.do?id=73>

inaugurated as the second mayor, People's Limbo is launched to react to the global economic crisis, constituted by ten activities in Second Life for avatars such as a competition of get out of the chaotic bubble and foot message served by Marx, Mao Zedong, Lehman Brothers and Lao Tze. The latest project is RMB City Code, a treasure hunt game with an award of 30,000 Linden Dollar starting from March 29, 2010 for a period of one month. Second Life users are invited to solve the puzzle “exploring the most secluded back alleys of the island and interacting with the most mysterious characters in all of RMB City”⁵, and find the missing Wang Guowei – a Chinese poet who was spotted in RMB City but disappeared soon, though as a matter of fact the poet in Real life has already committed suicide in 1927. Besides the events described here, there are more issues that have been discussed during the two-year process such as Revolutionary Pleasure Area and Second Life Tremors, Never Real Sound, etc.



Posters of RMB City Code
<http://rmbcity.com/2010/03/launch-of-rmb-city-code-a-sl-treasure-hunt/>

⁵ <http://rmbcity.com/2010/03/launch-of-rmb-city-code-a-sl-treasure-hunt/>

Products in Real Life

As shown above, one major aspect of RMB City is to organize creative activities on the Second Life platform. However it is very difficult to collect and conserve a work like this. Therefore up to date the selling of RMB City is mainly in the forms of video and digital print, which are, though related to the events sometimes, very different from the direct experience of RMB City in Second Life.

Checklist of Works for Sell

i.Mirror, Cao Fei, Video, 2007

RMB City: A Second Life City Planning, Cao Fei, single channel video, 2007

The Birth of RMB City, Cao Fei + RMB City, single channel color video, with sound, 10:30 minutes, 2009

People's Limbo in RMB City, Cao Fei + RMB City, single channel color video, with sound, 20 minutes, 2009

Fashions of China Tracy, Cao Fei + RMB City, Digital Prints, 2009

Live in RMB City, Cao Fei + RMB City, Video, 2009



RMB CITY 8, 2007

Digital c-print

47.2 x 63 inches; 120 x 160 cm

Edition of 10

There are also documentation of the construction and some of the events, which right now have no edition and are not supposed to be sold. Both works for sell and documentation are made by machinima studios such as Machitopia, which render terraformation and produce (directing, filming and editing) videos within virtual world as well as mix-platform and mix-reality works.

Checklist of Documentation

RMB City Construction, Video Series, 2008

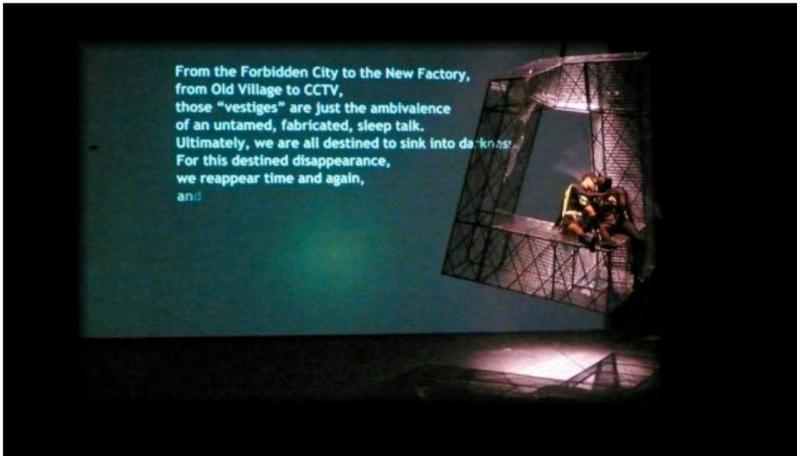
NO LAB in RMB City, Cao Fei + MAP OFFICE, Video, 2008

Qi of RMB City, Second Life project by guest artist Huang He + RMB City / Video by Cao Fei / Co-producer: Kaai Theater, Festival PERFORMATIK 09, Brussels, 2009

Commissioned by Arthub, RMB City Opera was first performed in a visual form similar to the Cultural Revolution Propaganda Opera in Artissima Turin Art Fair, combining in-world films from Second Life and staged acting.

Theatrical Play

RMB City Opera, Stage Performance, Director & Script: Cao Fei / Commissioned by Arthub, Produced by RMB City, Supported by DEPART Foundation, Original Curators: Davide QUadrio and Defne Ayas, 2009



Stage photos of RMB City Opera
<http://vitamincreativespace.blogbus.com/logs/51483289.html>

Technological Elements

There are several technical elements that we should keep in mind. One is that Second Life is an online environment not compatible with dial-up Internet, satellite Internet and some wireless Internet. Another important requirement is that Second Life is not compatible with the following graphic cards:

- NVIDIA cards that report as a RIVA TNT or TNT2
- ATI cards that report as RAGE, RAGE PRO, or RADEON 320M, 340M, 345M, or similar model numbers
- Intel chipsets less than a 945 including Intel Extreme
- Cards with the following branding: 3DFX, RIVA, TNT, SiS, S3, S3TC, Savage, Twister, Rage, Kyro, MILENNIA, MATROX

Below are the system requirements in general provided by Linden Lab on their website:

Windows	Minimum Requirements	Recommended
Internet Connection*:	Cable or DSL	Cable or DSL
Operating System:	XP, or Vista	XP or Vista
Computer Processor:	800 MHz Pentium III or Athlon, or better	1.5 GHz (XP), 2-GHz (Vista) 32-bit (x86) or better
Computer Memory:	512 MB or more	1 GB or more
Screen Resolution:	1024x768 pixels	1024x768 pixels or higher
Graphics Card for XP**:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVIDIA GeForce 6600 or better • OR ATI Radeon 8500, 9250 or better • OR Intel 945 chipset 	NVIDIA Graphics cards 6000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6600, 6700, 6800 7000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7600, 7800, 7900 8000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8500, 8600, 8800 GeForce Go Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7600, 7800, 7900 ATI Graphics Cards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X800, X900, X1600, X1700, X1800, X1900 • x2600, x2900 • x3650, x3850 NVIDIA Graphics cards 7000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7600, 7800, 7900 8000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8500, 8600, 8800 GeForce Go Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7600, 7800, 7900 ATI Graphics Cards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X1600, X1700, X1800, X1900 • x2600, x2900 • x3650, x3850
Graphics Card for Vista (requires latest drivers)**:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVIDIA GeForce 6600 or better • OR ATI Radeon 9500 or better • OR Intel 945 chipset 	NVIDIA Graphics cards 7000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7600, 7800, 7900 8000 Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8500, 8600, 8800 GeForce Go Series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7600, 7800, 7900 ATI Graphics Cards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X1600, X1700, X1800, X1900 • x2600, x2900 • x3650, x3850
Mac OS X	Minimum Requirements	Recommended
Internet Connection*:	Cable or DSL	Cable or DSL
Operating System:	Mac OS X 10.4.11 or better	Mac OS X 10.5.4 or better
Computer Processor:	1 GHz G4 or better	1.25 GHz G4 or better
Computer Memory:	512 MB or more	1 GB or more
Screen Resolution:	1024x768 pixels	1024x768 pixels or higher
Graphics Card**:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ATI Radeon 9200 and above • OR ATI Radeon X Series • OR NVIDIA GeForce 2, GeForce 4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ATI: X1600, X1900, X2400, X2600 • OR NVIDIA: 6800, 7600, 7800, 8800
Linux	Minimum Requirements	Recommended
Internet Connection*:	Cable or DSL	Cable or DSL
Operating System:	A reasonably modern 32-bit Linux environment is required. If you are running a 64-bit Linux distribution then you will need its 32-bit compatibility environment installed.	A reasonably modern 32-bit Linux environment is required. If you are running a 64-bit Linux distribution then you will need its 32-bit compatibility environment installed.
Computer	800 MHz Pentium III or Athlon, or better	1.5 GHz or better

Linux	Minimum Requirements	Recommended
Processor:		
Computer Memory:	512MB or more	1 GB or more
Screen Resolution:	1024x768 pixels	1024x768 pixels or higher
		NVIDIA Graphics cards
		6000 Series:
		• 6600, 6700, 6800
		7000 Series:
		• 7600, 7800, 7900
		8000 Series:
		• 8500, 8600, 8800
		GeForce Go Series:
		• 7600, 7800, 7900
Graphics Card:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVIDIA GeForce 6600, or better • OR ATI Radeon 8500, 9250, or better 	

According to Henrik Bennetsen, the virtual world might possibly migrate to web-based standard like WebGL instead of a standalone client like Second Life. If so, it may be easier to archive 3D environment as the archiving technology of webpage is much more advanced. Thus one of the practical issues would be to keep comprehensive data of all the models fabricated in RMB City to prepare for possible migration in the future.

Key Qualities and Recommendations

Even though RMB City is not a game in the regular sense, the game portion of the work, or at least influence from the culture of computer-game and virtual reality, is with no doubt one of the key qualities. Therefore the current state of collection seems not to be the most appropriate way, but rather a compromise adapted to the convention of the art market, as viewing a video or a photograph is definitely different from playing Second Life. I think there are three solutions to this problem.

One is to rent land permanently in Second Life as long as Linden Lab, which operates Second Life, exists. Because Linden Lab protects intellectual property and would preserve in their server any items created by users, renting land will ensure the displaying of the objects in RMB City. However, another important aspect of RMB City is the process to have activities happening in its public platform. In this sense, it might be meaningless to just conserve an empty RMB City with neither events to be produced in the future nor the traces of the past ones, not to mention no one could predict how long Linden Lab is going to continue running. If we take this idea into account, the documentation made by the artist might be a more proper way to archive the work, which allows future audience to understand the concepts behind the work even though they have to experience it in a different way. Thus ideally the third way to preserve it would be to produce an emulation of the Second Life environment in some storage independent of Second Life such as DVD or hard disc just like ordinary computer games, which documents the whole process in 3D environment— including events, avatars visiting, conversations among them and so on – and allows audience to go back to any moments of the two-year period as well as any locations in RMB City. The reason why it is important to save record of the visiting avatars is that many of them come from the art field and their points of view and ways of participation are also crucial for future generation to approach the work. The question is, though items are saved by Linden Lab, we are not sure whether they have records of which avatars have accessed a specific place or their actions and conversations. Last but not the least, the conservation of an artwork is highly subjected to what kind of institutions are collecting and how much

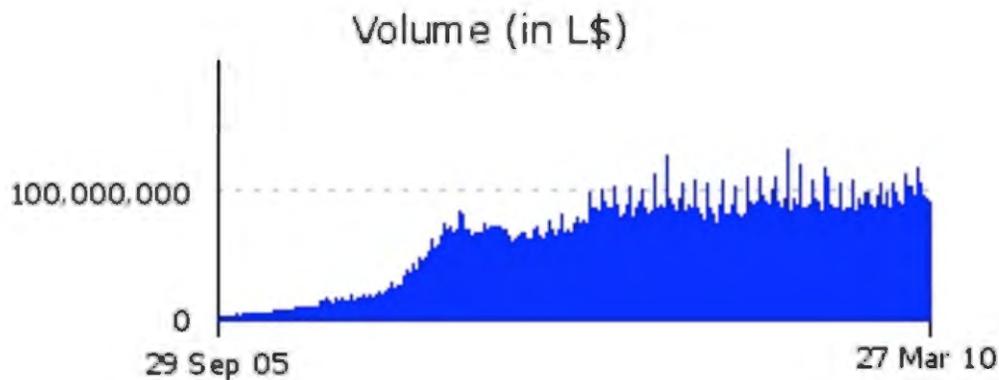
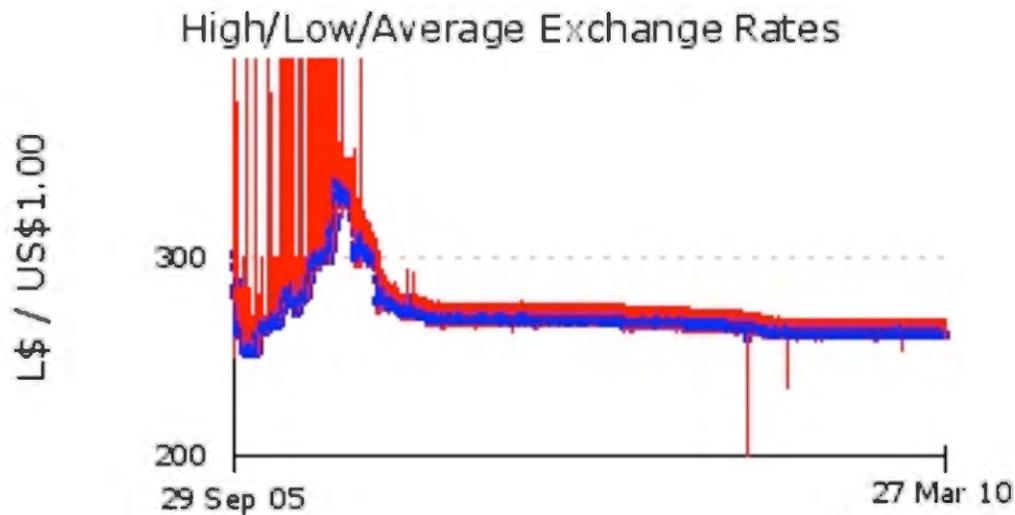
budget they have, which means the actual preservation would probably be a combination of different methods according to their motivations as well as conditions.

Condition and Risks

As RMB City is approaching its end this year, the artist and the representative gallery Vitamin Creative Space are now considering the possibilities of archiving and preservation. Therefore they seem to be quite reluctant to provide concrete information about co-production companies and the fees required for the operation of RMB City. As stated above, if Linden Lab does not save data about conversations and activities of individual avatars, then the only records of the past events happened in RMB City would be the artist's documentation, and we can only either emulate the final state of RMB City separately or keep exhibiting it in Second Life, instead of building a "time machine" for it.

Also, considering that Second Life has its own economic system which is basically player-produced and not controlled by Linden Lab, while at the same time the taxing and law system is still developing, it is also difficult to predict the funding needed for future operation within such an innovative and complicated system.

The recent market data from Linden Dollar Exchange is:



The Fees regulated by Linden Lab:

Second Life General Fees

Fee	Benefit
Free	Sign Up, Avatar Creation, Login ID, Access, Participation
US\$1	250 Linden Dollars (variable) - brokered purchase; may go to LL or a resident seller
US\$0.30	per transaction fee for buying Linden Dollars on Lindex currency exchange
3.5% of transaction value	per transaction fee for selling Linden Dollars on Lindex currency exchange
US\$9.95/month	Premium membership (access to higher mainland

	ranges as below, 300 Linden Dollars per week, access to live and ticket support)
US\$125/month	Land as below, plus Concierge service (live support access)
US\$150	Island relocation
US\$50	Island rename
US\$100	Island interuser transfer (includes relocation and renaming)
US\$500 plus 20 premium memberships	Unique avatar surname for an organization

Second Life Land Use Fees

Monthly Land Fee	Additional Land	Parcel Size (m ²)	Square Equal Line Length (m)	Max Prims
US\$5	1/128 Mainland Region	512	22x22	117
US\$8	1/64 Mainland Region	1024	32x32	234
US\$15	1/32 Mainland Region	2048	44x44	468
US\$25	1/16 Mainland Region	4096	64x64	937
US\$40	1/8 Mainland Region	8192	90x90	1875
US\$75	1/4 Mainland Region	16,384	128x128	3750
US\$75	OpenSpace	65,536	256x256	750
US\$125	1/2 Mainland Region	32,768	181x181	7500
US\$125	Homestead	65,536	256x256	3750
US\$195	1 Mainland Region	65,536	256x256	15,000
+US\$95	+1/2 Mainland Region (when already at US\$195 level)	32,768	181x181	7500
US\$195	Private Island on pre-2007 server technology (second hand purchase only)	65,536	256x256	15,000
US\$295	Private Island on current server technology	65,536	256x256	15,000