

“The most radical action you can do is to subvert yourself”. Interview with Eva and Franco Mattes (a.k.a. 0100101110101101.ORG)

Domenico Quaranta

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Your previous projects attracted attention for their radical nature. Portraits has attracted some criticism due to its apparent banality. What is at the heart of the project?

Out of all our previous works Portraits is obviously the most radical one. The most radical action you can do is to subvert yourself.

What is the meaning of making a portrait of an avatar?

We see Avatars as “self-portraits”. Unlike most portraits, though, they are not based on the way you “are”, but rather on the way you “want to be”. Actually, our works are not portraits, but rather “pictures of self-portraits”.

I mentioned the term banality, a defect claimed as a feature by the only artist you explicitly refer to, Andy Warhol. What is it that links you to Pop Art?

The borrowing of characters and imagery from popular culture, comics for example, is a classic technique of Pop Art that was widely used by the likes of Lichtenstein and Warhol. Video games are part of today's pop culture. If Warhol were still around I'm sure he would use printers the way we're doing. After all, it's ink on canvas – what difference does it make whether it is a machine or a hand putting the ink?

So in what way is your work more than just a reproduction of something done with so much emphasis fifty years ago?

Fifty years ago? Portraits have been around for thousands of years! Art is always about rearranging previous ideas and genres. Culture is plagiarism. It is when somebody is claiming originality that one should start doubting.

In virtual worlds, the extraordinary is the norm. You could have played on the oddities, the weird or trashier aspects, but instead you have focused on beauty. Why is that?

We didn't choose beauty, it was elected by people creating their own alter-egos. They built their characters matching the Western canon of beauty, when they could be whoever and whatever they wanted. Some people find our portraits "cool" and "sexy", others find them "creepy" and "tragic". Not unlike Tamara de Lempicka's portraits, with their robotic beauty, I guess they're a bit of both.

Second Life raises issues about identity, but also about social life, architecture and economics. Why did you choose to work with portraits?

In Second Life you are forced not to be yourself, to wear an ultra-modern 3D mask. But masks are not there to hide your real identity, on the contrary they are there

to show who you really are, since you can ignore social restrictions. Since we've been living fake identities all of our lives, it's obvious that we are attracted by a world of Avatars.

Like the Internet, a virtual world is a social space which allows community experiments, the adoption of fictitious identities, experiments with the concepts of property and plagiarism. Do you think it would make sense to work on projects like your previous ones?

Generally speaking yes, for us, as we have already done so, no. Our contribution to Net.art in the '90s was exactly that, raising topics such as plagiarism, originality, reproducibility, authenticity, identity theft. It doesn't mean that we should stick to this. It's way more difficult to change than repeat yourself forever.

And besides, synthetic worlds are radically different from the Internet: if the Internet is Protestant, synthetic worlds are Catholic.

Portraits heralds an interesting turning point in your work. Where do you think it will lead?

The career of an artist is usually about finding a "personal" style and endlessly repeating versions of it. On the contrary, we've been trying to avoid creating a recognizable style by any means. There is no continuity in our work, so I can say with absolute certainty that this work will lead us to do something totally different.

One thing I find very interesting is what could be termed the gradual humanization of 0100101110101101.ORG into Eva and Franco Mattes. It would be easy to view this as a concession to the art world, and its need for an artist figure to venerate, but what springs to my mind is the evolution of the digital

identity highlighted by *Portraits*: from a series of numbers to an avatar, from the construction of an identity to the care of a body. What is your view?

Eva and Franco Mattes are as much a construction as 0100101110101101.ORG is, maybe even more.

Why?

We've been keeping changing identity for ten years now: we've been Luther Blissett, Darko Maver, Renato Posapiani and Tania Copechi, 0100101110101101.ORG. In our works we have embodied the Vatican, Nike, the European Union. Eva and Franco Mattes are the last evolution of our long-standing identity *dérive*, probably the most complex one. The last identity you pick is always the most complex because it also contains the previous ones.

Freud says that to become adults we need to kill our fathers. Which of your many fathers have you killed off with *Portraits*?

We're trying to get rid of Duchamp, and all artists should. He has had too much influence on contemporary art.