

## Life and Its Double

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“If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?” Tyler Durden, *Fight Club* [1]

At the beginning of 2006 Eva and Franco Mattes made their first incursion into Second Life, an online virtual world created in 2003 by the American company Linden Lab. The duo, known as 0100101110101101.ORG, had just spent a busy year working on the project *United We Stand* (2005 – 2006), a massive advertising campaign for a non-existent movie: a European-produced war blockbuster in which Europe saves the world from an imminent conflict between China and the United States. With a consummate manipulation of advertising conventions and mass marketing codes Eva and Franco Mattes created a kind of mental short circuit, staking all on a legend that no-one wants to believe in, and communicating it using the codes of another, dominant legend, that of American supremacy.

Second Life, on the other hand, is a legend that works. With more than two million participants to date, it is, in the words of William Gibson, a “consensual hallucination” based on solid foundations, primarily of an economic nature. Unlike other successful virtual worlds, such as the famed World of Warcraft, Second Life is characterized by the almost complete absence of the game metaphor. Its participants,

known as residents, are engaged in constructing exactly that, a second life, which means taking care of the appearance of their virtual persona, or avatar, giving it a house, possessions, a social life, making it work and above all buy. Second Life offers a new model of cyberspace; as the Mattes duo note, if the Internet is Protestant (strict, structured, mostly textual and iconoclastic), synthetic worlds are Catholic (icon-loving, lavish and elaborate). And while it is by no means a given that as a product Second Life will stand the test of time, the model of Second Life is set to change our lives on the Internet, and probably life in general.

But there is another aspect of this model that could not but interest the Mattes duo at this time. As a whole, the virtual world created by Linden Lab could be described as an “identity factory”, a concept that has been something of an obsession for the duo since they took part in the Luther Blissett project (1994 – 1999), a collective that has claimed responsibility for a number of works involving manipulations of the mass media [2]. By presenting themselves as 0100101110101101.ORG and circulating legends about their real identities, the Mattes are openly taking a stand against the personality cult surrounding the figure of the artist. Their creation of the tormented artist Darko Maver (1998 – 1999) reveals how much of this personality cult is based on fiction and stereotype. Their hijacking of the Vatican website (1998 – 1999) to manipulate its contents showed how a strong identity can put out any message it wants to without being challenged; by acting in the name of Nike (*Nike Ground*, 2003 – 2004) they proved that it was possible to appropriate a public identity; and by working with an identity that has been imposed on us (that of citizens of Europe) they publicly exposed its substantial inconsistencies.

It was during the work *United We Stand* that 0100101110101101.ORG decided to bring to the fore two of the many names they had used up till then to identify their projects, namely Eva and Franco Mattes. Once again these are pseudonyms, but in 2006 these names seemed to be a more appropriate way of representing their public identity than a series of numbers (which is also a domain name). It is as if

0100101110101101.ORG are acknowledging the ongoing process of personalization of our digital identities: in 1998 we were data in a network of information, whereas now we are people inhabiting a virtual universe.

This is where the encounter with synthetic worlds comes in, and Eva and Franco Mattes realized that the most radical way of tackling this evolution of the concept of identity was to work on portraits. The series *Portraits* was exhibited for the first time in a show staged in Ars Virtua, an exhibition venue inside Second Life [3]. As a tribute to Warhol the show was entitled *13 Most Beautiful Avatars*. It opened on November 15 2006, in a gallery space that is the exact reconstruction of the physical space about to host the same portraits 15 days later, on November 30 2006: the Italian Academy at Columbia University in New York. On the upper floor was a huge video screen linked up to the virtual show being staged in Second Life. This game of mirrors between the real and the virtual, first and second lives, is the norm when we are dealing with virtual worlds. But Eva and Franco Mattes have chosen to maintain the sense of ambiguity, without offering any banal solutions. The exhibition space constructed in Ars Virtua is a copy of the physical gallery space, but the virtual event opens two weeks earlier (which means that the real-world show is a reproduction of the virtual one); in Second Life the portraits are of the same substance as their subjects, and adorn the same setting as these subjects inhabit, while at the Italian Academy they are presented in another context, in the overtly physical form of large format prints on canvas. The virtual exhibition was visited by the subjects of the portraits, while the real-world exhibition saw some of their creators put in an unexpected appearance.

## **Surfaces**

“It must be hard to be a model, because you’d want to be like the photograph of you, and you can’t ever look that way. And so you start to copy the photograph.” Andy Warhol [4]

As we have seen, this hall of mirrors is typical of virtual worlds. Expressions like “in world” and “out of world”, used by residents to refer to Second Life and the outside world respectively, are like a kind of inverted anthropocentrism. The most famous avatars in Second Life, those who have made a name for themselves “in world”, are rarely well known in the real world. After much insistence, Aimee Weber [5], the famed fashion and content designer who Eva and Franco Mattes dedicated a triptych to, came along to the opening of the show at the Italian Academy in New York. The photograph that captures her in front of the portrait of her avatar bears witness to a singular paradox: that of a real person completely outdone by her virtual self-representation. The image prevails over the person, as is always the case in the star system. But on a closer look, there is an element of novelty: what we are calling ‘image’ is in actual fact the immaterial projection of the self within a virtual space, within a world and community that does not exist outside the computer screen. The avatar has taken the upper hand.

In other words *Portraits* bears witness to the gradual humanization of our digital identities. To get a measure of this it is worth having a closer look at another project by Eva and Franco Mattes, which immortalizes the previous status of the digital identity. The project in question is *Life Sharing*, commissioned in July 2000 by the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis [6]. Starting from the statement that “a computer, with the passing of time, ends up looking like its owner’s brain” [7], 0100101110101101.ORG decided to enact a gesture of extreme transparency (glasnost), sharing the entire contents of their computer, transforming it into a web server: the ultimate digital self portrait. The critics talked about “abstract pornography” (Hito Steyerl), “open-source living in the digital age” (Steve Dietz), “a complete form of self-exposure” (Tilman Baumgärtel), based on a kind of voyeurism stimulated not by images, but by data and information. Yvonne Volkart noted: “The project... exaggerates the assumption that our life and our identities are based on purely determined and determining accumulations of information”; and Marina Griznic insisted: “The identity of 0100101110101101.ORG is represented, not

through the psychology of an individual, but through the formation of a new visual and cultural space, via the recycling of stereotypes.”. A concept that Franco Mattes summed up in a one-liner: “We don’t have emotions; we have a Hewlett-Packard.” [8]

*Life Sharing* bears witness to a particular stage in the evolution of our digital identity. Although it was already possible to mediate this identity through a webcam or an avatar in a virtual world or chat system, it did not yet have a face, being composed of different types of data in a constant flow on the Internet. But our faces and bodies reproduced by a webcam are not the face and body of our identity on the Net, merely part of the data comprising it. This was why, according to 0100101110101101.ORG, the best way of representing ourselves on the web was essentially abstract, and involved putting the viewer in touch with the intimacy of data.

Virtual worlds heralded the advent of a new phase. The cloud of raw data has finally solidified into a body and a face. To show our identities we no longer need to expose the kernels of our computers, but just work on the bodies of our avatars, their skin, hair and hairstyles, clothes and accessories. The dedication we put into this alone shows that our public image, our avatar, contains a lot of ourselves. There is nothing under the surface. The striking thing about this new phase in the evolution of our online identities is the fact that all our characteristics (personal details, psychological and sociological attributes) are represented by the avatar, its features and possessions. Data is gathered in a face, and can be offered up in the form of a portrait. Indeed the fact that we can now portray this identity, in the most traditional sense, is the best demonstration of the concreteness now attained by our virtual identities. The simplification of the medium, in this case, is inversely proportionate to the sophistication of the subject.

This reveals the importance – and the radical nature – of something as apparently banal as photographing avatars. By taking these photographs, and then

printing them onto large canvases and exhibiting them in an art space, Eva and Franco Mattes are performing two crucial operations. On the one hand they are saying loud and clear that the subjects they have chosen are neither simulacra or characters in a game: they are people, complete, complex identities with defined social roles in a society comprising two million inhabitants, and they are an effective representation of the canons of beauty of that society. On the other hand the duo reiterate this statement by including their pictures in the great tradition of portraiture.

## **Altering egos**

“I is another” Arthur Rimbaud [9]

This operation is rooted in the profound continuity that exists between the current concept of avatar and the role played by the classic genre of portrait painting throughout history. The Indian word “avatar”, which in Hindu religion indicates any physical incarnation of the divine, came into use in the eighties and nineties to indicate the symbolic projection of the videogame player in the game setting [10]. In other words, a kind of puppet that does everything I tell it to by means of a series of input tools (mouse, keyboard, joystick, gamepad). It is my on-screen alter ego. Often it has nothing to do with me, but is assigned by the game, and merely carries out the conventional actions possible in that particular setting (fighting, shooting, etc). But what happens if we are given the option of customizing that avatar, and my mission becomes that of constructing a second life in the virtual space I have access to? What happens when the videogame becomes a public arena? What happens is that the avatar becomes something more than a puppet following my orders: it becomes the projection of my identity in a public space, the appearance that I wish to have when I emerge from my private space. It becomes the mask I have constructed to interface with the environment (be it real or virtual) that I inhabit. Since its outset, the aim of the portrait genre has been to immortalize this mask, or in other words, to construct avatars. More often than not it was a case of making the subject conform to a certain

type (the beggar, the philosopher) or role (the emperor, the courtier). Psychological introspection, which in some contexts assumed great importance, has always been seen as a kind of “extra”, though obviously the best portraits are the ones that reveal something of the person through the avatar, like *Baldassarre Castiglione* (1514 – 1515) by Raffaello, or Diego Velázquez’s various versions of Felipe IV. Even in the nineteenth century, when the portrait cut loose from its official role and became more of a private genre, the avatar – the cultural construct that a person creates to interface with the world – did not diminish in importance. On the contrary: just consider *Monsieur Bertin* (1832) by Ingres, the icon of the bourgeois world and attitude, or Van Gogh’s self portraits, which filter his malaise through the (stereotyped) image of the disturbed, down-at-heel artist, in conflict with the real world and himself.

But it was with the advent of pop culture, a star system that set out to become the new Olympus, and a series of media (photography, film and video) capable of capturing its aura, that the avatar became so powerful that in a certain sense it began to live its own life, and to condition the subject it was the image of.

Andy Warhol, the “self-made” artist who thought of himself as a mask, best interpreted the situation. In his *Philosophy* he wrote: “Photographs usually bring in another half-dimension. Movies bring in another whole dimension. That screen magnetism is something secret... you can’t even tell if someone has it until you actually see them up there on the screen.” [11]. This was how he came up with his “screen tests”, brief videos where he invited his models to be themselves in front of the camera, with the aim of assessing their magnetism. And this was what led to *13 Most Beautiful Women* (1964) and *13 Most Beautiful Boys* (1964), the works that provided the inspiration for the Mattes’ series of portraits exhibited in New York. In both Warhol’s videos and the Mattes’ prints, beauty is not a facile concession to the aesthetic demands of the viewer; it is the proof that we are dealing with cultural constructs, with the products of an established industry of beauty. In his portraits, Warhol went one further: he started by reproducing well constructed avatars, and studying the factors that make a face into a pop icon (the Marilyns and Jackies of the

sixties), then in the seventies and eighties he transformed faces “without an aura” into icons. Warhol got skilful with make-up, both on the face being portrayed and on the reproduction itself: he took a person and gave back an avatar.

In synthetic worlds, this work is carried out assiduously and constantly by the residents themselves. Unlike Warhol, Eva and Franco Mattes do not have to construct avatars; what they have to do is to make them real, get the person to emerge, capture the appeal of an aesthetic that mixes the limits of polygonal graphics with the postcubism of Tamara de Lempicka, and find an angle that enables them to extrapolate the cultural strata that have given rise to a face, breasts, lips.

Talking about *United We Stand*, Ben Davis interprets the work of Eva and Franco Mattes as the result of “an equivocal fascination with the power of mass cultural codes... when the mass media has penetrated firmly into the everyday” [12] *Portraits* bears witness to another stage, one in which these media give us the opportunity to construct a second life, a second identity. And we can all do it, manipulating the codes of tradition and subculture, adapting aesthetic and behavioural models imposed by the media to construct another “self”. Pop life 2.0.

### **Like tears in rain**

And so we come to the event that provides the occasion for this essay: the exhibition “LOL” at the Fabio Paris Art Gallery in Brescia. LOL is such a widely-used acronym that its precise origins are not known. It is used by online communities to express humour and amusement (standing for “Laugh Out Loud” or “Lots Of Laughs”) or as a sign-off (short for “Lots Of Love”). Like the street, virtual communities are seed-beds for new expressions and slang, which a variety of different subcultures contribute to. By using this linguistic ready-made as a title for their show, Eva and Franco Mattes apparently intend to draw attention to the various cultural codes that contribute to the lives and mysteries of their avatars, and that bubble away under the apparent surface glamour. Nothing new there: the culture



clash between high-brow and popular culture, kitsch and good taste was played out and resolved in the sixties. What's new is that now there are other forces at work: the contraposition between physical reality and a virtual sphere that is increasingly concrete and real, bursting with impulses, feelings and increasingly profound desires; and the evolution of tools originally designed for communication purposes, but which have now become the means for creating new planes of reality and identity. This is where the tragedy of these portraits lies, the profound malaise that is concealed behind their sophisticated make-up: like the replicant in *Blade Runner*, they are alive, yet they are, and will always be, artificial products destined to disappear, avatars. Like him, "they've seen things us people wouldn't believe". And "all those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain." [13]

### **Notes:**

[1] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, 1996.

[2] Cf. <http://www.LutherBlissett.net/>

[3] <http://www.arsvirtua.com>. The show, curated by Marisa Olson, was presented by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in collaboration with Rhizome.org.

[4] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, 1975.

[5] Cf. <http://www.aimeeweber.com/>

[6] Cf. <http://collections.walkerart.org/>

[7] In 0100101110101101.ORG, "Life Sharing concept", November 2001. Online at [http://0100101110101101.org/home/life\\_sharing/concept.html](http://0100101110101101.org/home/life_sharing/concept.html).

[8] For all of these quotes, see [http://0100101110101101.org/home/life\\_sharing/index.html](http://0100101110101101.org/home/life_sharing/index.html)

[9] Arthur Rimbaud, “Lettre du Voyant (à Paul Demeny)”, 15 May 1871.

[10] According to Wikipedia, the term was first used in this sense in *Ultima IV* (1985), and was made popular by the writer Neal Stephenson in the novel *Snowcrash* (1992), where it indicates the virtual simulation of the human body in the Metaverse. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/>.

[11] In Andy Warhol, cit.

[12] Ben Davis, “Pop Life”, in *Artnet*, 16 December 2005, online at <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/davis12-16-05.asp>.

[13] Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, 1982.