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All the Web's a Stage

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Performance art, gallery openings, Dumpster-diving for junk to turn into art—all of it is happening in an online world populated by computer-generated beings called avatars

by Rachel Wolff

Eva and Franco Mattes's *Synthetic Performances* was produced as part of Performa 07, last fall's biennial of performance art in New York. But the artwork involved no live action, no stage, no human spectacle. While the Italian couple and their director, Paolo Ruffino, sat in the back at SoHo's Artists

Space silently manning laptops, about 60 downtown types filed into the gallery and seated themselves before a ten-foot projection screen. Most of the audience, however, was dispersed around the world, sitting in front of their own computer screens. It was their unscripted actions that added the unexpected to the evening of classic performance-art reenactments. The action was taking place in Second Life, a network-based virtual world where anyone with a little tech savvy can download a program and create an "avatar" whose interactions with other avatars have much of the excitement, discomfort, and unpredictability of real-world encounters.

When the Second Life performance space came into view on the screen, buxom, blond Eva and dark, handsome Franco were surrounded by a crop of virtual misfits. Some appeared human, some less so, as Second Life allows you to take any form, be it a bird or a superhero or even a stick—the shape chosen by Magdalena Sawon, codirector of New York's Postmasters gallery, which represents Eva and Franco Mattes. Ruffino had an avatar, too, and it was through its eyes that those assembled at Artists Space viewed the proceedings.

The first online reenactment that evening, with Eva and Franco's avatars standing in for Gilbert & George in the 1970 work *Singing Sculpture*, elicited laughs from the audience at Artists Space and rapidly typed "hahas" from the viewers online; such comments appear in a text-based chat area in the bottom-left-hand corner of the screen. But it was the second performance that got people talking. For his 1972 *Seedbed*, Vito Acconci masturbated beneath a platform constructed in the Sonnabend Gallery while a microphone broadcast his moans and verbal fantasies to the bewildered audience above. Now avatar Franco opened a trapdoor and disappeared beneath the on-screen floor. His heavy breathing (a prerecorded sound bite) prompted much discussion among the other avatars: "Is that Vito whacking off?" "They never do food at art openings. Just breathing noises." The piece ended shortly after the director looked under the platform to give the Artists Space audience a peek at an R-rated Franco, pantless and panting.

Despite the hallmarks of a low-budget animated short—cartoonlike characters moving jerkily through unabashedly fake surroundings—*Synthetic Performances* seemed more and more like a live performance as the evening progressed. The avatars' commentary became more nuanced. And some got antsy and started reacting to the action, joining the Matteses' avatars atop a table as they posed as Gilbert & George and stealing looks at the illicit activity below Franco's *Seedbed* platform. Though they are carried out with the aid of technology, interactions on Second Life are nonetheless real and provoke responses. "The very act of calling it a virtual world is wrong," Franco says. "It's synthetic, but it's an actual world that is no less real than the phone conversation we're having right now." Franco notes that he has friends who have both married and divorced because of activities that occurred in Second Life.

Eva and Franco Mattes, also known as 0100101110101101.org, are part of a wave of artists working in Second Life. The art collective eteam has mined discarded objects and information from the site's Dumpsters, and last December, Second Front, a Second Life-based performance troupe, poked fun at the oversaturated Art Basel Miami Beach scene with *Art Basel Miami Vice*, an event featuring virtual ostriches running rampant in Miami nightclubs. Last year Center for Book Arts founder Richard Minsky launched *Slart*, a magazine covering the "real-world art issues" affecting the 1,000-plus galleries that



A still from Eva and Franco Mattes's *Second Life* reenactment of Gilbert & George's *The Singing Sculpture*.

COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

exist in Second Life.

Second Life, in turn, is just one of many easily accessible tools to emerge from the phenomenon commonly referred to as Web 2.0. The term describes Internet-based technologies that have evolved to include networking and interactivity and have transformed the online experience. Blogging has supplanted the construction of personal Web pages. Flickr, which lets you send messages to and connect with fellow shutterbugs, has overtaken Ofoto, a site on which people could just post their photos. Tagging, a method of organizing content via shared interests, has superseded online directories. And constantly updated, user-generated sites like Wikipedia have a cachet that single-author publishing lacks.

Now these technologies are breathing life into Web art. In the mid-'90s the genre consisted of hard-to-build, hackerlike Web sites and Web-based flash animation. Following the dot-com bust, support and visibility dwindled. Today, however, Net-savvy artists are responding to renewed encouragement generated by new-media and digital-art festivals, such as ZERO1, which will mount its second biennial in San Jose in June; contemporary museums actively building collections, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art; and even long-established institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, which brought together work by a half-dozen first-generation Web artists in last year's "Automatic Update" exhibition.

Performance artists, who must learn to integrate and react to audience feedback, are especially drawn to these tools. "Even clicking a link requires interactivity, and any art that involves interactivity has a performative element to it," says Christiane Paul, adjunct curator of new-media arts at the Whitney Museum and the driving force behind Artport, the museum's online exhibition space for new-media and digital art that was launched in 2001.

Paul points to Australian performance artist Stelarc as an early innovator in the field. The artist once suspended himself from hooks in his flesh, and his interest in the body as a controlled tool led him to explore the larger field of remote interaction. He became involved with Net-based art in the mid-'90s using motion-capture technology to replicate himself and his movements in the form of a three-dimensional animated character. In later work he covered his body with electrodes and allowed computer users in far-flung locations to activate his muscles.

Scott Paterson and Jennifer Crowe inverted that remote-controlled, artist-audience relationship with *Follow Through* (2005). Handheld media players could be loaded with an audio guide to the Whitney's permanent collection that, instead of explaining the art on the walls, instructed visitors to act in ways that disrupted the passive, predictable art-viewing experience. The piece, which was commissioned by the Whitney and Antenna Audio, might be described as a technologically updated Happening.

Artists using the Web as their platform have found that it can also be a rich source of raw material. Blogs and YouTube provide unprecedented insight into millions of extroverted strangers. Golan Levin's *Dumpster: A Visualization of Romantic Breakups for 2005*, a cocommission of the Whitney's Artport program and the United Kingdom's Tate Online, provides an interactive portal to the private world of heartbreak. The site presents visitors with vibrating pink and navy balls. Clicking on a ball opens a text box filled with a blog-posted tell-all edited by Levin; the text boxes link together in a fractured narrative.

Artists Martin Wattenberg, who works at IBM Research, and Marek Walczak likewise used data-mining techniques when composing *Noplace: Heaven* for an exhibition at the Netherlands Media Art Institute's Video Vortex last fall. The work takes the form of an immersive installation, a labyrinthine setup of enormous screens with constantly evolving layered projections of texts and images, culled from sites like Flickr and MySpace, that the original posters had tagged as somehow related to the idea of heaven.

"Artists are working with material from the Web in a way that speaks to the way Pop art worked with appropriation strategies," says Lauren Cornell, director of Rhizome, a nonprofit organization that supports new-media art. "They're taking the material and reframing it. All of these artists are really blurring the lines between digital media and the rest of life. They're using it to look at the culture in a new way."

Cornell points to artist collective Paper Rad as influential in this emerging practice. Paper Rad started in 2001, when Jacob Ciocci, his sister Jessica, and Ben Jones began publishing a comic book, which eventually led to a Web site, flash animations, and videos. Most recently, the Cioccis have been mining YouTube for both contemporary and vintage material for "mash-ups"—often-hilarious shorts that overlay and integrate found digital videos in a way that would not have been possible with film montage. In *Umbrella Zombie Datamosh Mistake* (2007), for example, pop sensation Rihanna blends with Cranberries lead singer Dolores O'Riordan through a heavily pixelated transition, and while the music fades, two girls in acid-washed denim shorts dance while a woman clad in gold lamé saunters through with her Afghan hound.

Although Jacob Ciocci calls the mash-up technique a "Surrealist gesture," the work is meant to expose the potential and the limitations of the technology. "The quality on YouTube is, by many standards, poor," he says, "but it doesn't seem to get in people's way of using it. I try to find the worst compression I can find on the Internet and create a rapid-fire collage of all that horrible compression together. It's about bringing people's awareness of the technology they're using every day to a new place."

Rhizome is setting a new standard in the way it promotes, commissions, exhibits, and archives Web art. Founded in 1996 as an online hub for artists and curators interested in new-media and digital art, it was given a permanent home when its longtime affiliate, the New Museum, reopened on the Bowery in New York last December. Already the organization has emerged from the media-center ghetto by curating "Montage: Unmonumental Online," the final installment, opening on the 15th of this month, of the museum's inaugural exhibition, "Unmonumental." The show includes work by such artists as John Michael Boling. YouTube serves as a palette for Boling, whose *Guitar Solo Threeway* (2006) consists of three videos of people who have filmed themselves playing the guitar; when one video is taken down from YouTube by its creator, another automatically replaces it. The evolving piece unites the soloists in

an off-key rock ensemble.

Despite the explosion of work in digital media and of organizations like Rhizome, broad institutional support has not been forthcoming. "Museums are still very much behind in terms of showing this work," says Paul. She points out that museums are either wary of in-gallery, tech-based interactivity or simply lack the staff and the infrastructure to mount and support such works. Difficulties can arise simply in getting museum IT departments and curatorial staff to work together. But Paul reports progress: "What I'm seeing now is shows at smaller museums around the country. I'm hoping that it will bubble up."

Many new-media and digital artworks meet a similar hesitancy from commercial galleries that are unsure how to sell them. As was the case with early performance-based and conceptual art, these works exist largely outside the market for now. Galleries such as Chelsea's Postmasters, bitforms, and Foxy Production have sold Net-based work as limited-edition software. While they wait for such practices to become more widely accepted, some artists have been trying to marry their work to more-traditional materials. "It's a question of how much compromise the artist is willing to make," says Sawon. "Some people don't want to buy videos, but they will buy a video still. Some artists will never do that, because for them the idea of making a photograph is not necessarily representative of the whole time-based piece. It's the same issue with a lot of media art." For their most recent show at Postmasters, "13 Most Beautiful Avatars," Eva and Franco Mattes photographed some of Second Life's self-described beauties and mounted the portraits of avatars on canvas in what they called a riff on Warhol. The works sold for \$10,000 apiece.

Franco Mattes says he and Eva will continue to mine material and insights from Second Life "as long as it is interesting." The couple's final performance at Performa 07 was a reenactment of Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* (1977). On the Artists Space screen the artists' avatars took off their clothes and positioned themselves facing each other across a narrow gap in a doorway. Other Second Life avatars at first stared, and then began sliding through the narrow space between the two naked performers, who remained unfazed. Everything followed the lines of the original performance, until some of the patrons stripped down, too; one seemed to be getting fresh with avatar Eva, displaying the heightened expressiveness typical of the virtual realm.

"It was such a good idea, I'm sort of jealous that it never crossed my mind," says Abramovic, who has supported Eva and Franco Mattes from the start. "It's very interesting, all this separation between our body and mind. It's another world, but sometimes it's more real than the real one."

Rachel Wolff reports on art for New York magazine.

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