

Performa 07 in Second Life: Brave New Metaverse

For two of this year's offerings, Performa explored an online venue. Developed in 2003 by the Linden Lab, Second Life (SL) is a MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-playing game), a "metaverse" where users can make customizable representations of themselves (avatars) that move, speak/chat and interact with other participants in a virtual 3-D setting of their own creation. The user population has grown well into the millions in the last year and at any given moment there can be about 45,000 residents online. Basic access is free to almost anyone worldwide who is over the age of 17, has broadband service and is willing to register, choose a pseudonym and learn to maneuver without walking into walls.

As an art venue, Second Life's potential is unique. It provides instantaneous access, and everything occurs in real time. It also affords direct communication with an international audience more willing than most to engage (anonymity is a marked disinhibitor). Works in SL need not be constrained by much other than imagination, since real-world laws of nature are pretty much null and void. And fabricating costs are nil.

The downside resides in a host of intermittent technical difficulties. Due to its popularity and exponential growth, the servers that host SL occasionally get overtaxed, resulting in the failure of people and objects to render properly, or an overall lag. There is also no avoiding the cartoonish quality of the visuals.

To date, the majority of artists seem content to use SL simply as a platform to reach a wider audience, opening virtual galleries complete with copies of their real-world work installed within. There are a few notable exceptions, one being Cao Fei's contribution to last year's Venice Biennale. Her SL name is China Tracy, and she has crafted a dreamy, melancholy series of films shot within the cyber-reality of SL. Those artists who are interested in exploring all the possibilities that a virtual environment offers have the most to gain, and the performance genre would seem to be an ideal match.

Eva & Franco Mattes, *Synthetic Performances*

Like Marina Abramovic, whose seven-day marathon reprising landmark performances of the '70s and '80s was the centerpiece of Performa in 2005, the European team of Eva & Franco Mattes has been using its avatars to re-create historically significant performances in SL since January 2007. For Performa 07 they chose Gilbert & George's *The Singing Sculpture* (1971), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972)—Abramovic recreated the same piece in '05—and Abramovic/Ulay's *Imponderabilia* (1977).

The performance began with the attention of the assembled avatars being directed toward one of three stages. The first piece was *The Singing Sculpture*. In the original, Gilbert & George, in business suits, their faces and hands gilded with paint, rotated like automatons atop a small table while a tape recorder played "Underneath the Arches," a sentimental love song popular in the 1930s. The Matteses performed this and all of the other pieces as approximations of their real-world selves, which added a level of distance to their reenactments (neither Gilbert nor George wore a skirt for *The Singing Sculpture*).

Eva & Franco Mattes: *Synthetic Performance*, 2007.



Sadly, my audio stream failed, a glitch that seemed to be shared by others in the crowd, so *The Singing Sculpture* lacked its soundtrack. The failure of sound rendered the second piece, *Seedbed*, nonsensical since it is essentially an audio piece. For the original, performed at New York's Sonnabend Gallery, Vito Acconci lay hidden beneath a broad ramp, masturbating, while

loudspeakers broadcast his low-keyed moans and mumbled fantasies. In SL, avatars milled about on the ramp much as visitors had at Sonnabend, the biggest difference being that in SL, it was possible to peer under the ramp and watch Franco go at it, a bonus not offered by Acconci.

Imponderabilia required audience participation. The original had Abramovic and Ulay standing naked in the narrowed entrance to the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna. Until the police closed the performance down, anyone wishing to enter the museum had to turn sideways and choose which of the artists they would face as they squeezed by. Once inside the gallery the participants found that their choice and their passage had been captured by a hidden camera. The Matteses' re-creation involved a similarly narrowed doorway. Avatars were invited to choose which naked artist they would confront by clicking a button: pink for Eva, blue for Franco.

At first I had thought the re-created performances were designed as earnest homages, but there also seemed to be something more subversive going on. As if the move to a cartoon universe were not enough of a change, the Matteses seemed to have deliberately chosen works that depend on the physicality of their performers for their meaning. You can't smell, taste or touch in SL. Watching an anime version of oneself sidling past a computer simulation of a naked body completely lacks the titillation and embarrassment of actually pressing the flesh with a real person. A 10-minute reprise of *Seedbed* strips away the sense of Acconci's six-hour feats of masochistic endurance, which he repeated daily for three weeks. The Matteses have either blithely reduced these works to pop-culture routines or they have distilled them down into their most basic form as working drawings of the original ideas.

Second Front, *Wrath of Kong*

The troupe Second Front has been creating original work since 2006, its eight members hailing from Canada, Italy, the U.S. and the Virgin Islands. Not content to simply recycle or simulate, they are enthusiastic practitioners of the theater of the absurd, ever eager to suss out the performative possibilities of SL. Their presentation, *Wrath of Kong*, was a loose allegory about a battle of artist egos in a race to conquer New York. Filled with strafing biplanes, flaming bombs and graphic bursts of video-game iconography, it teetered on the edge of amiable chaos. While real-world venues frown on dowsing an audience with napalm or crashing planes into it, not so in SL, where virtually anything goes, and Second Front was quick to take advantage.

King Kong's ascent of the Empire State Building was alternately helped and hindered by members of the troupe climbing the sides of the skyscraper by means of ramps and ladders running around the exterior. The building's summit was wrapped in a bank of Super Mario Brothers clouds, à la Cory Arcangel. Beauty, in the form of three performers garbed as versions of Princess Peach (another video-game reference), killed the beast and a good time was had by all. While I didn't necessarily "get" all the nuances of this performance, Second Front seems to get what creating in a virtual world can be about.

—Kate Wodell (a.k.a. Circus Tilling)

[Eva and Franco Mattes's *Synthetic Performances* were also viewable at Artists Space. Their website is www.0100101110101101.org. Second Front's online blog offers a record of *Wrath of Kong* and all their work to date at www.secondfront.org. You can register for Second Life at www.secondlife.com.]



Second Front: *Wrath of Kong*, 2007.