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AVATAR

By Nat Muller

The two-week Amsterdam festival (29.5-14.6) Avatar: Of Post-modern Times and Multiple Identities was an event co-organised by Axis, De Balie, Paradox, MonteVideo and the Society for New and Old Media.

An avatar can probably best be described as a consciously chosen alter ego, or sub-personality. In a culture which becomes more and more defined as schizoid, identitarian fragmentation becomes more and more a prominent matter. This is not necessarily a bad thing: debris can be at times quite constructive, especially when the debris consists of the smithereens of rigid socio-cultural conventions. Avatars allow a play with traditional boundaries; they allow an experimentation with entities which otherwise might seem confining (class, gender, race, geography). The developments in new media technology and communication have opened up a playground for the formation of avatars: MUDs (Multiple User Domains), IRC (Inter Related Chat), email, and so on. Moreover, it is technology which allows avatars literally to materialise (virtual bodies, faces, voices etc). The choice of creating and presenting an alternative personality, is much more than an act of the imagination only: the implications are much wider. That is, avatars question dichotomies such as real/virtual; authentic/copy; artificial/natural. They erode boundaries of entities we have learned to perceive as binary opposites. What else can we do than applaud such a thing? On the other hand though, we must remind ourselves that all this is "play" _ albeit that play may have far-going cultural consequences _ and that how much PoMo theory may like to see all definitional boundaries dissolved, reality often still is that an avatar won't pay your rent. But this aside. This is my own frustrated scepticism! If anyone of you out there has an avatar paying your rent, then send me the recipe by all means!

The Festival

The festival title, the amount of organising bodies involved, the diversity of the programme (exhibition, video-screening, symposium), as well as the plurality of the various festival venues, testify that "multiplicity" was a core issue. I do regret that I wasn't able to attend all the happenings: for example, I missed out on the video-screenings at MonteVideo, which showed two films by Lynn Hershmann (Virtual Love and Double Cross Click Click), Gillian Wearing (Confess All on Video and Sacha and Mom), and the wonderful Annie Sprinkle (Linda/Les & Annie). And I must admit that I didn't really have the patience to sit through all the sessions at the symposium. But the whole happening was quite jam-packed, and you needed certainly a few split personalities (read avatars) to attend everything.

Let's start with the exhibition. This was in my opinion the most successful element of the whole festival. The venue couldn't have been more amazing: De Oude Kerk in the centre of the red light district in Amsterdam. Choosing this beautifully renovated old church for the exhibition, as an installation by itself! The combination of the authoritative yet very breezy architecture of the church, with the (new) media installations was an avatar by itself. I was really impressed by that. Now, I don't want to discuss every piece at the exhibition in detail, for that would render it all into a boring enumeration. So, I will just discuss the works I was most impressed and/or most disappointed with. Now what was nice about the exhibition was that some of the works interpreted identity in a

very material and physical way (for example most of the photography), and that other works preferred to regard identity formation as a rather disembodied process (the web projects for example). So there was this tension between visual/physical representation (WYSIWYG-style), and ideological representation (what you don't see, what might be there).

There was a good deal of photography present at the exhibition. I particularly loved Hamish Buchanan's (Canada, 1955) photos of veiled men. His work combines male eroticism with fragility. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we gaze on these men through a veil: we do not quite read them as anything except as the objects of our semantic and visual desire. That makes them fragile on the one hand, but sensuously mysterious and powerful on the other hand. We can only guess at what the veil conceals. Cindy Sherman, who has over the years proved to be a virtuoso in the continuous creation of multiple identities, also had her work featured. The work of Sherman as always examines the workings of representation and unmasks the artifice of identity construction, whether she is her own model or whether she uses dolls (as in the pieces at the Avatar exhibition).

The American artist Tony Oursler (1957) made quite an intriguing and scary installation by projecting a video onto the face of a rag doll. The spectator thus really has the impression that the doll is personally addressing her/him. Very eerie! In "Blink" the Dutch artist Bea de Visser (1957) uses morphing technique to allow the face of one person to blend into that of another. Morphing is an excellent strategy to show that personal identity is not a rigidly demarcated entity. I actually quite liked this installation, and spend quite some watching how facial features blend into each other and form something new.

A very nice web-project was "Bearded Ladies" by Ine Poppe (NL 1960) and Jetty Verhoef (NL 1956). This project is great: it's funny, but actually offers an extremely sharp critique on all the websites where women are _ yet again _ subjected to the male gaze. In "Bearded Ladies" you anticipate a porn web site, but you get a series of very sensuous women with beards. Talking about suspending disbelief! I just love how they fuck around with the process of expectation and objectification: the stupefied spectator becomes quite baffled, and so on his/her (?) turn becomes objectified.

Two projects which have been getting a lot of media attention are **Debra Solomon's** (NL 1963) "the_living" (http://www.the_living.org) and **Jemima Brown's** (GB 1971) "Dolly". I must admit that these works couldn't really excite me. Check out Solomon for yourself on-line. Jemima Brown "performs" with her plastic alter-ego "Dolly". Dolly is an inflatable sex-doll looking like the artist; the two thus look like identical twins and Jemima has often a harder time "imitating" Dolly than the other way round, as the video "Copying" shows. In the latter Jemima tries to mimic Dolly's "unflinching determination to remain still". Jemima sees Dolly as a "collaborator", who not only illustrates the artifice of identity construction, but indirectly also questions such issues as cloning, plastic surgery and genetic manipulation. The videos shown at the exhibition were "Pumping up Dolly Brown": here Jemima and Dolly are dressed (as usual) in the same outfit, and Jemima tries to pump up the punctured inflatable doll. I like Brown's concept, but viewing the videos is somewhat a boring experience. But then again, I never DID understand conceptual art.

Other artists participating in the exhibition were: Janine Antoni, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Luc Courchesne, Deborah Hammond, Merel Mirage, David Rasmus, Humberto Rivas, and Vibeke Tandberg.

Now, the least part of all this was the Symposium. It all looked very promising, but most of the time I was very disappointed with the speakers. The enticing title "How to Bake an Avatar(t)" just

didn't live up to my appetite. But this is perhaps due to the fact that philosophical PoMo discourse just doesn't make up a very scrumptious ingredient. Anyways, the main question in this virtual cooking class was to examine how "disembodied" personalities figure in particular media environments. Eric Kluitenberg opened the symposium by problematising identity in virtual environments, and how people communicate and present themselves in the latter. Then Margot Lovejoy _ an American multi-media artist and professor in the Visual Arts at the State Uni of New York _ read a paper titled Avatars: Looking from the Other Side of the Mirror. The problem was that it made me feel as if I was in a lecture hall at college, with a tired lecturer rattling of the chapter of the day. She spoke about how technology as a factor can affect the construction of identity, and then she had this whole argument about `zines (forgive me, but I didn't see the connection). What I certainly didn't like was her etymological explanation and interpretation of the word "Avatar". The Hindu God Vishnu has 10 avatars (or representations of being) of himself, and these avatars are agents who will redeem mankind. Very nice! But I just don't see the link with our present culture! Why should this be relevant?

Ine Poppe (artist and specialist on multi-user environments) had quite a fun presentation on visual on-line worlds, she didn't just talk, but also showed us things on-line, and that was nice. She explained how she first got introduced to MOOs, and how in "The Metro" (Holland's most successful MOO) people are quite reluctant to experiment with identities. Sadly enough Walter Hop (Metro's wizard) joined her, and he shocked us with his unimaginative and conservative comments. According to Walter visuals are unnecessary: text is all you need (that's quite a boring and conservative statement). He also thought it quite over the top that someone would present himself/herself differently in a MOO than in IRL. That is, cross-dressing is a no-no for Walter. Perhaps Walter is the incarnation of blending the virtual with the real, yet in a very unimaginative and undemocratic way. Walter's attitude leaves no space for play whatsoever and after all we're talking about a game here!

The following day **Mararete Jahrman**, an Austrian media-artist, cyberwoman and publicist, gave a talk cum performance titled "SUperFEM per4MANce". Well Margarete was gorgeous, but impossible to understand coz her voice got sampled all the time, and her accent was really heavy. Margarete was addressing issues such as data sets being representations of yourself, and about the colonisation of programming languages and protocols. She also had a lot to say about cyberfeminism, but it was totally incomprehensible. I don't know whether this was the purpose of her performance, but it left me frustrated.

The most impressive project, and far the best talk was by Susan Collins, media artist and head of the Electronic Media Department at the Slade School of Fine Art (University College London). Her project "In Conversation" (<http://www.inconversation.com> or <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/inconversation/>). During the festival "In Conversation" was "active" at the Oudezijds Voorburgwal. The purpose of the installation is to explore the impact of new technology on communication. Susan was interested to examine how the conflation of two public paces: that of the internet and that of the street would work out. The assumption being that on the net people are very eager to talk, while on the street people are reluctant to communicate. First launched in Brighton, Susan projects a mouth onto a pavement, and passers-by on the street will hear a computer-generated voice triggered by internet users who log onto the site, and try to attract passers-by attention. The aim is to allow the virtual and the real interrelate. With this work she tried to erode technophobic barriers, by make people talk. The outcome has been quite surprising: not only would the internet users develop a `web protocol" to strike up a conversation, but they had to invent strategies how to attract attention as well. The weird thing was that a lot of passers-by would revisit the installation to chat with the on-line friends they'd made. Sometimes people would really let

themselves be manipulated to doing things on the street, like dancing or singing a song. Another fascinating aspect was how technological shortcomings influenced the whole project, and created by itself a whole new form of communication. For example, if many people would dial in at the same time sentences of different conversations would get mixed up, so that a collective conversation would somehow be created. Also the 10 to 20 second time lag, would cause confusion and strange semantic outcomes. Yet what is so attractive about this project, is that it is truly interactive. The people _ whether on-line or on the street _ make up the installation. I loved this! Look out for a forthcoming interview in Fringecore with Susan Collins.