

**Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.ORG**  
*Reenactment of Marina Abramović and Ulay's Imponderabilia*

“Eva and me, we hate performance art, we never quite got the point. So, we wanted to understand what made it so uninteresting to us, and reenacting these performances was the best way to figure it out.”<sup>1</sup>

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The advent of re-enactment, of both historical events and artistic performances of the past, has gone hand in hand with the renewed success of performance art as of the 90s, to the point where it is now interpreted as one of the signs of this success.

Events like *A Little Bit of History Repeated* (Berlin, Kunst-Werke 2001), *A Short History of Performance* (London, Whitechapel Art Gallery 2003), and the stir created by *7 Easy Pieces* by Marina Abramović (New York, Guggenheim Museum) and works like *The Third Memory* (1999) by Pierre Huyghe or *The Battle of Orgrave* (2002) by Jeremy Deller, would appear to support this theory. Yet a moment's consideration of the characteristics of performance art in the 60s and 70s is enough to understand that re-enactment, rather than a sign of victory, is actually the most evident indicator of its defeat, its capitulation to the rules of the art world (which demands products) and the entertainment business (which demands repetition).

While radical stances like Marina Abramović's (“no rehearsal, no repetition, no predicted end”)<sup>2</sup> were relatively isolated at the time, there was broad consensus over the need for authenticity (opposing the fictional nature of theatre, the eternal adversary of performance art), together with that of creating unique, unrepeatable, unpredictable events (with the immediacy of the ‘here and now’) which could not be reduced to the status of object or product. If this is performance art, re-enactment is its consummate nemesis. Re-enactment takes up (repeats, reconstructs and responds to) an original event. It is based on a script, and is therefore entirely predictable, and it has a defined ending. Lastly, its dialogue with the source event, and exploration of analogies and differences respect to the original, require preparation, rehearsals and the construction of a set. Its quest for authenticity is based on a reconstruction, which brings it dangerously close to theatre, and, due to the fact that, like the performance art of the 90s, it comes into being in a completely media-dominated world, derivative products are almost inevitable; indeed in some cases re-enactment exists only in mediated form.

Few have acknowledged the fundamentally Oedipal nature of re-enactment with the lucidity demonstrated by **Eva and Franco Mattes**. Their *Synthetic Performances* (2007 - 2008) are a series of six re-enactments of historic performances of the 60s and 70s, staged by the artists' virtual alter-egos in the synthetic world of Second Life. As they have stated, the series arose out of their polemical stance

with regard to the concept of performance art and the very works that they “pay tribute” to. This leads them on the one hand to breach the classic rules of performance art, and on the other to present these works – the efficacy of which was based on the radical way they explored the issues of the body, violence (Chris Burden), sexuality (Valie Export, Vito Acconci, Marina Abramović), identity (Gilbert & George), and the environment and public space (Joseph Beuys) – in a context where these issues acquire a completely different meaning, and as a consequence the original energy of the performance, and its power to provoke, dissipates, or turns into something completely different.

In the words of the Mattes: “We chose actions that were particularly paradoxical if performed in a virtual world.” And: “everything is mediated, nothing is spontaneous. More or less the opposite of what performance art is supposed to be.”<sup>3</sup>

But if the *Synthetic Performances* were merely a statement against performance art, they could be seen at the most as proving a point: simple, direct instant-works without any subtle nuances and probably not destined to last much longer than the debate that generated them. In actual fact the interesting thing about these works lies less in the mortal blow they deliver to performance art and more in the subtle way they bring it to life in a new context and lend it – if you will pardon the pun – a second life.

A virtual world is a 3D synthetic environment which the user operates in by means of a virtual alter ego, or avatar. The problems that virtual worlds pose to those not familiar with them can be summed up as follows: in a virtual world, representation and existence are one and the same thing. We no longer distinguish between the medium and life, because life is entirely mediated. I *am* my avatar, and the fact that my avatar is an artefact, a puppet made of polygons and textures, certainly doesn't stop me from identifying with it. When I say “I”, it is my avatar talking. Obviously I can say “I” because there are millions of other “I”s with whom I can speak, dance, work, have a drink, have sex, fly around, fight, and engage in a host of other activities. If we wish, a virtual world is a consensual hallucination<sup>4</sup>.

When we download the Second Life client and make our first access we can still cling to the belief that it is merely a piece of software, but after a few days we cannot but acknowledge the fact that it really is a world, with its own complex society, rules to obey, and rapidly evolving lifestyles. Entering a virtual world means facing up to a new possible form of existence, and the *Synthetic Performances* are first and foremost an attempt to explore this new horizon using a form of art which intrinsically focuses on life. In other words, Eva and Franco Mattes use performance art to explore “life on screen”.

Let's take *Imponderabilia*, for example. In 1977, on occasion of their participation in a group show at

the Galleria Civica in Bologna, Marina Abramović and her partner Ulay stood, completely naked, facing each other, in the narrow entrance to the exhibition, leaving only a restricted passageway which could be used by one person at a time, moving sideways and pressing against both of the artists' bodies. The artists themselves, immobile, appeared to be immersed in an interplay of intimacy excluding all else, while the members of the public wishing to enter or leave the exhibition area were obliged to squeeze between their naked bodies: a moment of forced physical intimacy set against a gaping emotional divide.

Re-enacting *Imponderabilia* literally implies transforming it into a script, and necessarily taking the media accounts of the event on board. Restaging it in a virtual world basically means planning everything: building the set, writing code to prevent the two actors from moving when they come into contact with another body, and writing other code to allow the spectators to squeeze easily through the narrow gap. On occasion of the New York festival Performa07, when Eva and Franco Mattes staged a live re-enactment of *Imponderabilia*, the other avatars present had two "scripted objects" at their disposal, positioned at the edges of the set: clicking on the left hand one meant you crossed the threshold facing Franco Mattes' naked body, while clicking on the right hand one meant you came up against Eva's synthetic physique.

As we have said, the event was staged live, in front of two different sets of spectators: those of Second Life, who took part from the comfort of their own homes, by means of their avatars; and the audience at Performa07, who followed it "from a distance", projected onto a wall in the presence of the artists, who were there in front of them in the flesh, albeit absorbed in their computer. The contradictions of this set-up are self-evident: the event was both live (with the unpredictable immediacy of performance art) and heavily mediated (in particular, the projection was not a fixed camera stream - there was directorial control over the way the real life spectators experienced the performance); and two levels of existence intertwined, meaning that the same event was experienced in very different ways. The real-life audience experienced the event as a show, but at the same time they were able to speak to the artists engaged in the performance. For them, the re-enactment worked on the same level as a citation: being fully conversant with the original event, they could recognize it and appreciate the differences, as the laughter and comments captured on the recording show.

The Second Life audience, on the other hand, were able to participate in the event, enrich it with new meanings, star in it and reintroduce the element of unpredictability that had been eliminated at the

preparatory stage. Some avatars stripped naked before squeezing between Eva and Franco Mattes, while others, who didn't understand the interaction mechanism, took up position in front of the door, and still others exploited the situation to give rise to new performances of their own.

As we can see, *Reenactment of Marina Abramovic and Ulay's Imponderabilia* lends itself very well to highlighting the specific contribution that the work of Eva and Franco Mattes makes to the issues involved in re-enactment. The fact that a performance that revolves entirely around the unsettling sensation of intimacy created by a naked body in a public area ends up looking “paradoxical” in a virtual world does not mean that it is entirely stripped of meaning. Avatars have sex, and even though this takes place by means of improbable sexual prostheses, and the activation of sound files and a movement script, this does not mean that there are no consequences on the emotional level. Many avatars are reluctant to strip off, and those who do so in a public place are viewed as irritating troublemakers, and risk expulsion.

The complete “mediatization” of the event introduces another question. While re-enactment always concerns “re-mediation”, namely an appropriation or translation of other media or media objects, in a virtual world this is par for the course. But Eva and Franco Mattes go one further, taking up the documentation of the original event with philological care. No concession is made to the “vernacular” aspects of Second Life: their avatars are realistic, and the settings are reconstructed with painstaking precision; even the angles chosen by the direction faithfully reflect the photographic and filmed records of the original event. We have mentioned the term “citation”, but the duo's long-standing interest in plagiarism could point to the concept of copies and originals in this context. Their *Synthetic Performances* thus represent the destiny of performance art in an age where life itself, and no longer just works of art, can be technologically reproduced.

Lastly, it is important to note that in the re-enactments by Eva and Franco Mattes, the conceptual hub of the work is spatial rather than temporal. As Jennifer Allen writes, re-enactment is to do with time: “Reenactment depends upon a linear construction of time. Of course, the 're' denotes a return to an earlier time, the existence of an event that has expired and therefore can be safely enacted once again, without being confused with itself.”<sup>5</sup> And Inke Arns notes, “Events [...] are re-enacted that are viewed as very important for the present. Here the reference to the past is not history for history's sake; it is about the relevance of what happened in the past for the here and now.”<sup>6</sup> The *Synthetic Performances* also implement this kind of examination, but rather than effecting a temporal shift, they work in terms of space, transporting an event into another context, another medium. The aim remains the

comprehension of the here and now, but it is the *here* rather than the *now* which is challenged.

## **Domenico Quaranta**

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Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers

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<sup>1</sup> Eva and Franco Mattes, “Nothing is real, everything is possible. Excerpts from interviews with Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.ORG”, 2007. Available online at <http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/performances/interview.html>

<sup>2</sup> From a statement of 1976, presented in AAVV, *Marina Abramović. 7 Easy Pieces*, Charta, Milan 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Eva and Franco Mattes, “Nothing is real, everything is possible...”, quoted.

<sup>4</sup> William Gibson’s uber definition of cyberspace in the novel *Neuromancer* (1984): “Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts...”

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Allen, “Einmal ist keinmal. Observations on Reenactment”, in Sven Lütticken (ed.), *Life, Once More. Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue, Witte de With, Rotterdam 2005, pp. 177 - 213

<sup>6</sup> Inke Arns, “History Will Repeat Itself”, in Inke Arns, Gabriele Horn (eds), *History Will Repeat Itself. Strategies of re-enactment in contemporary (media) art and performance*, exhibition catalogue, Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin 2007.