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**Reality bytes**  
Eva and Franco Mattes are known as the Bonnie and Clyde of contemporary art.  
Deepanjana Pal finds out about their capers.



Sholay ("Sholay was like Sergio Leone on drugs!" they said). This fortnight, they will make their Indian debut at Galerie Mirchandani+ Steinruecke.

Eva and Franco Mattes are recognised as pioneers in the field of net art, which involves scrambling or copying internet codes. For *Life Sharing* (2000), they submitted themselves to a year of satellite surveillance during which their every move was monitored. In 2003, they courted media attention with an elaborate prank titled Nikeground. Nikeground circulated the rumour that Nike was going to buy and rename the town square Karlsplatz in Vienna which would be renamed Nikeplatz. The point was to trick an entire city and to a large extent, they succeeded. However, the protests they had expected against the privatisation of public spaces didn't materialise. In 2006, the duo decided to make art out of and in Second Life, a virtual world where members, known as Residents, interact with each other using online personae, known as avatars. Second Life avatars are three-dimensional and animated, hovering between realistic, robotic and cartoonish. "We have always experimented with drugs, especially LSD," said Franco. "We like being totally spaced out and see the world from a different perspective. Second Life reminded me a bit of that feeling, like being in *Blade Runner* or in *Neuromancer*."

In 2006, Ars Virtua, a gallery in Second Life, hosted an exhibition by Franco and Eva Mattes at which they showed portraits of characters in Second Life. The same show, with the avatars were printed on canvas, was also taken to more conventional gallery spaces across Europe and in New York. The age-old European tradition of portraiture met the pop-art sensibility of Andy Warhol, held up a mirror to ideas of beauty and explored how identity is constructed in contemporary society. In Second Life, "masks are not there to hide your real identity", explained Franco. "On the contrary they are there to show who you really are, since you can ignore social restrictions. Since we've been living fake identities all of our lives, it's obvious that we are attracted by a world of avatars."

The tension between the real and the virtual also inspired the *Synthetic Performances* series in which Franco and Eva recreated a number of famous performance art projects in Second Life. They picked "the most weird performances; maybe for all the sex and pain involved, which is completely absent, or, well, 'abstract' in a [video] game", said Franco, who hates performance art as a genre and can't see the point of it. In Mumbai, they will show the re-enactments of Chris Burden's "Shoot", Marina Abramovic's "Seven Easy Pieces" and Gilbert & George's "The Singing Sculpture" on large screens. The synthetic world of Second Life robs performance art of its central characteristic: spontaneity. Everything is mediated through avatars and feels oddly abstracted. The jerky, movements of the avatars further underscore the artificiality of the performances.

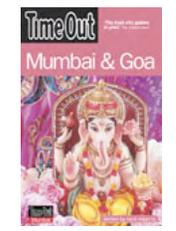
A number of Eva and Franco's projects have been about art. Between 1998 and 2000, the duo created the fictional artist Darko Maver, by setting up a website and posting pictures of his art works, which recreated scenes of murder and violence using mannequins (in reality, they were pictures of real crime scenes that were freely available online). They convinced many of the existence of this Serbian artist, only to eventually kill him. In 2001, they scrambled the code of the website of Korean Web Art festival so that the works of artists were exchanged. "I'm afraid I have a love-hate relation with art," said Franco. "I love it so much that I'm afraid to find out it may well be all bullshit, like a religious guy who after a whole life lived piously finds out before dying that god does not exist."



The duo's newest works, some of which will be shown in Mumbai, are photos "shot inside" a game called *Half-Life*. It's been one of their tougher challenges. "Every shot was taken while killing aliens, struggling with radioactive traps or while escaping helicopters," said Franco. "Sometimes I had to go through the whole scheme over and over for hours, because every time I was trying to stand still and make the photo, some goddamn alien was trying to eat my brain."

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