

# POSTMASTERS

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## Eva and Franco Mattes

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Eva and Franco Mattes, best known as the collaborative 0100101110101101.org, have engaged in such pranks as launching an ad campaign for a fake movie (*United We Stand*, 2005) and creating a computer virus as their contribution to the 2001 Venice Biennale. Their “hacktivist” tendencies, already somewhat mild, have been diluted even further in their new series, “13 Most Beautiful Avatars,” 2006. The Matteses, after spending about a year as members of the online community Second Life, selected thirteen of the most “visually dynamic” characters they encountered and created individual portraits—based on consensual “photo shoots”—of these computerized personae.

Second Life is an immersive digital universe frequented by more than three million people. In order to join, one must create an avatar. Each gender has several basic templates; for women, the choices include “Girl Next Door” and “Cybergoth.” Building off these types, users customize everything from height to nose shape. Body parts, hairstyles, and lifelike facial features can be purchased at stores that tout “high-quality clothes and skins.” The seductive promise is that every aspect of one’s appearance is purchasable and open to endless manipulation.

While for many Second Lifers, this amounts to a kind of freedom (from gender, age, and other physical categorizations and limitations), if judged only from the Matteses’ portraits, it has also produced a widespread uniformity. The figures depicted look eerily similar, like the postoperative contestants on the reality-TV show *The Swan* who have been surgically forced into the same bland mold despite racial differences. It could be argued that the Matteses are critiquing the strict adherence to stereotypical beauty, yet the overwhelming conventionality of the avatars’ good looks is overemphasized by the traditional format of the portraits. Most are tightly cropped head shots, and this decision to concentrate primarily on faces renders the subjects even more generic. The occasional accessory, such as sexy-librarian glasses or a glittery bracelet, does little to mitigate their similarities; two of the characters have moles in exactly the same place.

Reversing the obvious gender discrepancy among Second Lifers—over 60 percent of participants are male—the Matteses picked only two men for their pantheon. But asking why there are so many women misses the point: Why are all the artists’ subjects so recognizably *human*? Part of the appeal of the virtual is being unbounded by the constraints of the flesh, but the Matteses do not showcase this element. Even though one avatar, Aimee Weber, sports wings, none of these portrait subjects has so much as blue hair, much less an animal head or robotic hands.

“13 Most Beautiful Avatars” nods to the cyberspace obsession with ratings, as every picture or utterance is subject to some kind of starred ranking. It also draws clear inspiration from Warhol’s short films *13 Most Beautiful Boys* and *13 Most Beautiful Women*, both 1964, but is evacuated of the imperfections that made Warhol’s screen tests so mesmerizing. Gone are the alluringly glazed or asymmetrical eyes and crooked smiles. Despite the high-mindedness of this enterprise, the portraits, digitally printed on large canvases, merely illustrate the following banality: Given the choice, most people want to be pretty.

Virtual versions of five of the works were also installed in a gallery in

Eva and Franco  
Mattes (01001011  
10101101.org),  
Sarah Asturias, 2006,  
digital print on  
canvas, 36 x 48".  
From the series  
“13 Most Beautiful  
Avatars,” 2006.



Second Life. Blog accounts of the opening show avatars posing in front of their portraits. Likewise, at the recent Postmasters equivalent, the avatars’ human creators marveled at their artificial stand-ins. Which is more real, the simulacral construction or the embodied person? Who cares? Baudrillard is dead; must watered-down versions of his ideas haunt us forever?

—Julia Bryan-Wilson

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