Chapter 9

Meta_Body: Virtual Corporeality as a Shared Creative Process

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the Meta_Body participatory art project. Initiated in a collaborative virtual environment and in a “real life” art exhibition, it now continues in the metaverse creative flux. Meta_Body focuses on two aspects: first, the avatar as body/language, open to experimentation and potency; second, avatar building as a shared creative process and as aesthetical experience. Through the practice of avatar creation, distribution, embodiment and transformation, the artists aim to understand the processes of virtual corporeality constitution: to question the role of the body in virtual environment, its importance in engaging with the world and in self-expression, and explore its metaphorical aspects. The method used to implement this project is a shared creative process, in which multiple subjects come to be authors along different phases of the project. Through the embodiment and transformation of avatars, the artwork’s aesthetical experience becomes a creative process.

INTRODUCTION

Meta_Body is an ongoing project initiated in 2011 by the duo Meilo Minotaur (Sameiro Oliveira Martins) and CapCat Ragu (Catarina Carneiro de Sousa) in the Second Life (SL) virtual environment platform, in the Delicatessen region. Initially, this project consisted of a set of eighteen avatars, distributed in a virtual installation, which were free, copyable, transformable and sharable. SL residents who got them were invited to share with us any derivative creation, which resulted from the manipulation of these avatars. These manipulations were first presented in the form of machinima and virtual photography and in a second phase of the project as derivative avatars.

As an art-based research project, Meta_Body can be considered both a practice based and practice oriented research, since its theoretical framework informs but is also informed by artistic practices carried out in the virtual world. This project is focused on two aspects — the avatar
as body/language, open to experimentation and potency, and avatar building as a shared creative process and aesthetical experience.

Through avatar creation, distribution, embodiment and transformation, the artists aimed to understand the processes of virtual corporeality constitution: to question the role of the body in virtual environment, its importance in engaging with the world and in self-expression.

The project is conducted mainly in SL’s collaborative virtual environment, but has also been displayed in “real life” contemporary art exhibitions. The actualization of the project varies in each context, but it is never possible to cover all aspects of the project in an exhibition, since its interactive and participatory dimensions can only be experienced in a virtual environment. As an artwork, Meta_Body can be experienced in many different ways, as we will discuss later, but the embodiment and transformation of the avatars may turn the aesthetical experience of the work into a creative process. This is why the avatars were distributed not only for free, but also transformable, copyable and transferable, giving full freedom of use to the participants.

The method used to implement this project is therefore a shared creative process, in which multiple subjects can be regarded as authors along different phases of the project and where some of these individuals can switch between users and producers of materials distributed, making them produsers (Bruns, 2007), as we will describe later. We present three different approaches to the concept of shared creativity: the first, collective creation, is the process used by Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu in the construction of avatars and virtual installations, a cell group acting as a single author, in a very intimate form of creative process; the second, distributed creation, is how derivative work was created using the first set of avatars to build new creations which, in turn, fueled a reserve of materials available for the realization of new creations; and the third, collaborative creation, is a process in which each artist retains her personal mark in a creative dialogue with others — as was the case with Takio Ra (Luís Eustáquio), who contributed to the project by creating “soundscapes”8 for the virtual installations, as we shall see ahead (Sousa, 2013, 2014).

BACKGROUND

The project began as a response to the invitation to participate in the contemporary art exhibition All My Independent Women (AMWI), an event curated by Carla Cruz, a contemporary Portuguese artist and curator, interested in gender and the democratization of art. AMIW takes place irregularly across the world, based on a network of artists who address gender issues through their work. Its 6th edition, subtitled Or Rather, What Can Words Do?, was held at Vienna in 2011.

Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu had already participated in 2010’s 5th edition with SL based work. That edition revolved around the Novas Cartas Portuguesas/New Portuguese Letters by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa, an important Portuguese feminist book from 1972, banished by the dictatorship and consequently causing the political persecution of its authors. The 6th edition was an extension on this theme.

In its 1980 edition, Novas Cartas Portuguesas/New Portuguese Letters was prefaced by Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, a Portuguese politician who was the only woman prime minister in Portugal, from 1979 to 1980. She stressed the way the body operated in the book: going beyond its representation and working as a metaphor for all forms of oppression hidden and not yet overcome. This notion of a metaphorical appropriation of the body was paramount to the Meta_Body project. The body has a semiotic aspect that impacts our everyday lives (Pollock, 1996), for when the body is stripped from its physical form, its symbolic
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