

TAKING THE BODY OUT OF BODY ART

WHEN SECOND LIFE KILLS

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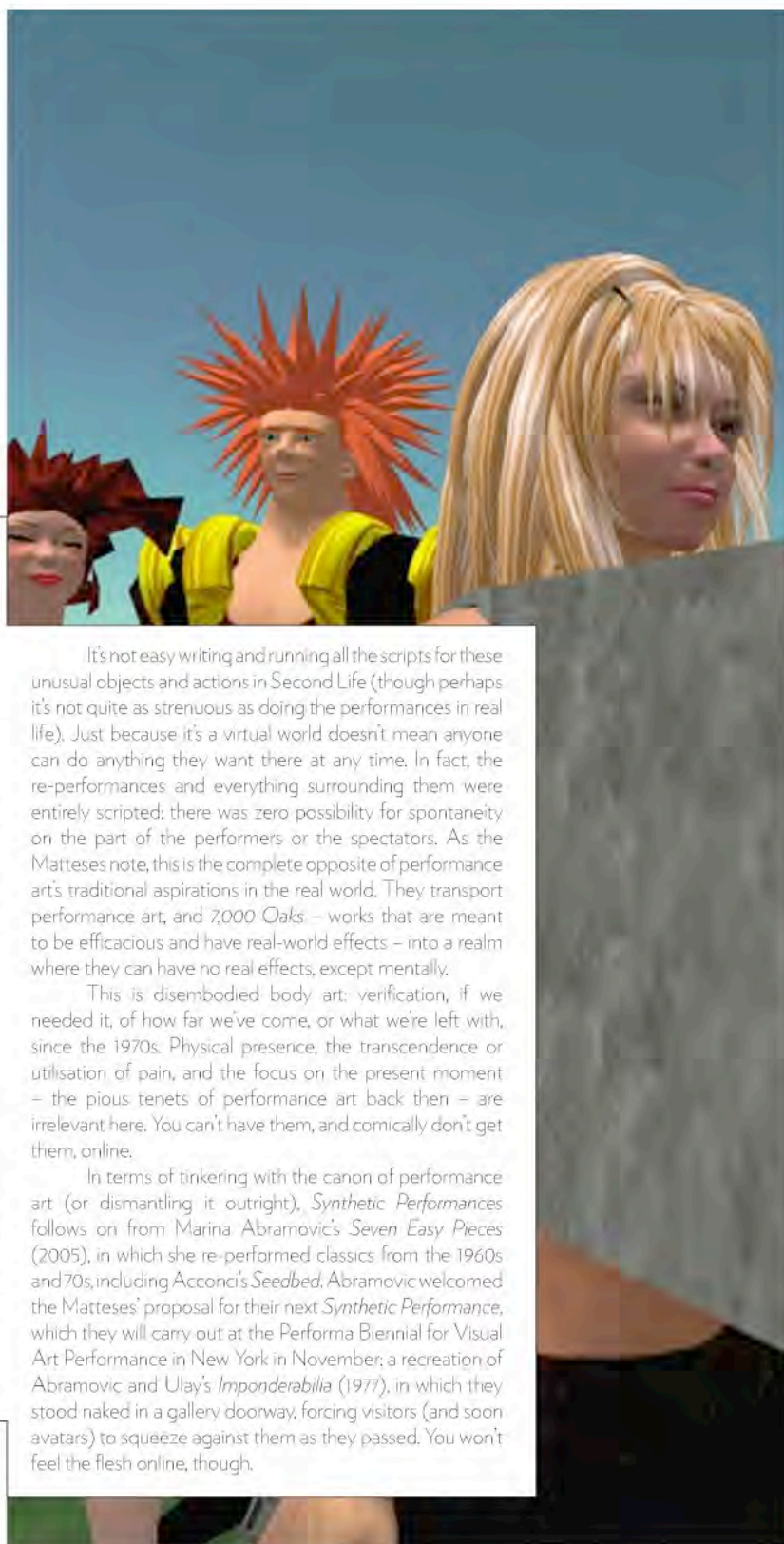
NEW MEDIA PRANKSTERS and shapeshifters 0100101110101101.org (yes, I had to copy-and-paste that) say on their website that they've always been attracted to things they don't like.

So in 2003–4 Eva and Franco Mattes – only recently did they confirm their true identities – impersonated Nike and set up an 'infobox' in Karlsplatz, Vienna, proclaiming that the square was about to be renamed Nikeplatz. Interviews the Matteses recorded showed that some Viennese weren't particularly upset at the prospect; Nike were, though: they sued (and eventually lost).

The Matteses don't like Hollywood, either, so in 2005–6 they made a trailer and marketing campaign for an imaginary action movie, *United We Stand*, in which Europe saves the world from a conflict between the US and China.

Now they've turned their attention to another long-standing irritation: performance art. ('We hate performance art, we never quite got the point', they say on their website.) In *Synthetic Performances* (2007–) they recreated in the online megagame Second Life some performance classics: VALIE EXPORT's *Tapp und Tastkino* (1968), Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972). Avatars gathered round in the Matteses' virtual gallery, Ars Virtua, to listen to Franco muttering as he virtually masturbated under the floorboards (after Acconci); to watch Eva shoot him in the arm while he stood against a wall (Burden); and to cop a feel – sort of – of Eva's boobs through the special box she wore around her neck (EXPORT).

The Matteses are also recreating Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (1982–7) project by piling up virtual oaks and basalt stones on their fictional Cosmos Island, in the hope that Second Lifers will pick them up and spread them around the entire virtual realm, like a computer-virus version of Beuys's efforts at environmental healing.



It's not easy writing and running all the scripts for these unusual objects and actions in Second Life (though perhaps it's not quite as strenuous as doing the performances in real life). Just because it's a virtual world doesn't mean anyone can do anything they want there at any time. In fact, the re-performances and everything surrounding them were entirely scripted: there was zero possibility for spontaneity on the part of the performers or the spectators. As the Matteses note, this is the complete opposite of performance art's traditional aspirations in the real world. They transport performance art, and *7,000 Oaks* – works that are meant to be efficacious and have real-world effects – into a realm where they can have no real effects, except mentally.

This is disembodied body art: verification, if we needed it, of how far we've come, or what we're left with, since the 1970s. Physical presence, the transcendence or utilisation of pain, and the focus on the present moment – the pious tenets of performance art back then – are irrelevant here. You can't have them, and comically don't get them, online.

In terms of tinkering with the canon of performance art (or dismantling it outright), *Synthetic Performances* follows on from Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), in which she re-performed classics from the 1960s and 70s, including Acconci's *Seedbed*. Abramovic welcomed the Matteses' proposal for their next *Synthetic Performance*, which they will carry out at the Performa Biennial for Visual Art Performance in New York in November; a recreation of Abramovic and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* (1977), in which they stood naked in a gallery doorway, forcing visitors (and soon avatars) to squeeze against them as they passed. You won't feel the flesh online, though.

Eva and Franco Mattes, *Reenactment of VALIE EXPORT's 'Tapp und Tastkino' (1968), from Synthetic Performance in Second Life, 2007*

