

# Meta\_Body

A Project on Shared Avatar Creation



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## Abstract

This paper will describe the ongoing Meta\_Body project, first held in an online virtual environment and in a “real life” art exhibition, now carrying on in the metaverse creative flux. The focus will be on two aspects of this project — the constitution of virtual corporality and the shared creative process of avatar building, sharing, transformation and embodiment. We will explore the metaphorical aspects of virtual corporality and embodiment and we will approach the possibility of a creative process as an aesthetical experience.

## Keywords

avatar, metaverse, produsage, shared creativity, virtual corporality

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## 1 . Introduction

1.Throughout this paper we will refer avatar's real names whenever possible on first mention, but we will prefer the in world avatar name for subsequent references, as this is the name they use to sign their works.

Meta\_Body is a project initiated by Catarina Carneiro de Sousa also known as (AKA) CapCat Ragu and Sameiro Oliveira Martins AKA Meilo Minotaur<sup>1</sup>, in the virtual environment of Second Life (SL), as a response to an invitation to participate in the 6th edition of the exhibition All My Independent Women (AMIW), an event which takes place irregularly around the world, curated by the artist Carla Cruz. The 2011 edition continued and extended the previous one, a proposal of a collective reading of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas/New Portuguese Letters* by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa, a 1972 book that was banished and caused persecution of its authors by the dictatorship (the case of the Three Marias), thus becoming a milestone in the history of feminism in our country, Portugal [1]. The subtitle of the 6th edition was “Or Rather, What Can Words Do?”, a question quoted from the book. It took place in Vienna, Austria from November 3rd until December 3rd, 2011, at VBKÖ (Austrian Association of Women Artists) space. In the publication that followed the exhibition one could read Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo's re-edited preface for the book's 3rd edition, dating back to 1980. She highlighted that, in the book, the body goes beyond its representation. It works as a metaphor for all forms of oppression hidden and not yet overcome [2].

This idea of a metaphorical body was crucial to our project. The virtual experience of the body is not exactly an experience of the flesh. Although metaverse experiences have a perceptual and sensorial aspect, they continue to be experienced in our organic body, not in our avatar body.

The word metaverse was coined by writer Neal Stephenson in his 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. In it, the metaverse was a fully immersive three-dimensional space where people interacted via avatars. Today, the term has been used to refer to the collective online space in general, but more particularly in the case of virtual worlds — three-dimensional computer generated spaces, which can be experienced by several people at once. Places inhabited by people and enabled by online technologies [3] .

For Beth Coleman the concept of avatar can refer to all digital extensions of the subject that interact in real-time over the telecommunications network [4] . However, we will essentially use

this term to address the animated figure that represents the user in 3D digital platforms.

In the metaverse one could look at a very realistic virtual cake and salivate, but if our avatar eats it one won't feel its flavour. The virtual body is a metaphorical body and therefore a body of expression and language. We focused on this aspect, in project Meta\_Body, thinking of the avatar as a body / language open to experimentation. A couple of months before the exhibition opening, CapCat Ragu and Meilo Minotaur built and distributed at Delicatessen<sup>2</sup>, their SL region<sup>3</sup>, a set of 18 avatars, freely available and open to be transformed and shared with other SL residents. A note was distributed along with the avatars inviting users to share on Flickr and Koinup groups whatever derivative work they produced. At VBKÖ only the derivative work was exhibited. 120 works were selected and presented as virtual photography or machinima<sup>4</sup>, with a total of 80 contributors integrating the project Meta\_Body for AMIW. The total number of works now shared between Meta\_Body's Flickr and Koinup groups exceeds one thousand.

This selection was shown again in 2012 in the AMIW Video Lounge at the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths University of London, at the Vox Feminae Festival in Zagreb and at Brotherton Library Special Collections University of Leeds. This time, a video presentation of the project was added to the derivative material<sup>5</sup>.

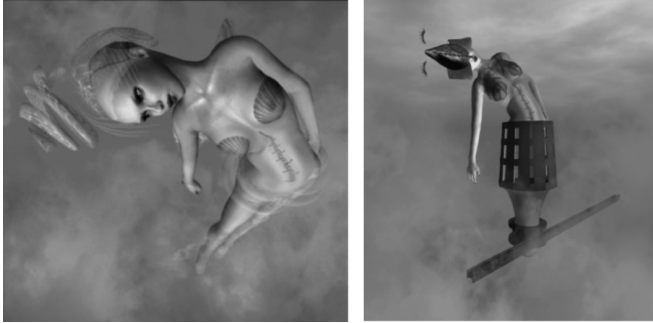
Meanwhile, CapCat Ragu and Meilo Minotaur decided to promote a second phase of this project — Meta\_Body II. Having the Meta\_Body project avatars as a starting point, SL residents were invited to share their derivative avatars, using any of the parts of the Meta\_Body project avatars, parts built by the users and/or parts built by other developers, since their specified license allowed redistribution with full permissions. All avatars had to be provided with full permissions, meaning that they had to be copyable, shareable and open for transformation. 22 creators built 26 new avatars, from well-known metaverse artists and designers to absolute new residents, trying SL and avatar building for the first time. These avatars are now being distributed at Delicatessen. For this purpose Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu built four virtual installations, in homage to the avatars and their creators. Luís Eustáquio AKA Takio Ra was invited to make a sound intervention.

2. <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Porto/167/168/21>

3. A region in SL is a 256m x 256m virtual land area hosted by a single simulator process. Usually they are referred to as sims [5].

4. Virtual photography consists of still captures from inside a virtual environment (post processed or not), while machinima is video captured in the same fashion.

5. <http://youtu.be/amlk38J-aDY>



**F. 1/2** Aqua, one of Meta\_Body first avatars and Blind Train, a derivative avatar by Eupalinos Ugajin for Meta\_Body II, both captures by CapCat Ragu.

All the sounds used in these soundscapes are also being shared with the residents with full permissions.

The method used to implement this project is a shared creative process, one where several participants are authors at different stages of the project, and where some of these individuals permute between users and producers of the materials distributed, thus becoming producers [6] , as we will describe later. There are, however, three different approaches to the concept of shared creativity — collective creation, the process used by Cap-Cat Ragu and Meilo Minotaur in the building of the avatars and the virtual installations, a cellular group acting as one author, in a very intimate creative process; collaborative creation, a process where each artist maintains her authorial personal mark in a creative dialogue with other artist/s, the way Takio Ra contributed to the project, by creating soundscapes for the virtual installations; and distributed creation, which was how derivative work was created using the first set of avatars to build new creations which, in turn, fed the pool of materials available for the making of new creations.

## 2 . Virtual Corporality

On SL, avatar building is always a shared creative process, as residents can modify their avatars but they can also upload their own contents, designed outside the platform, such as textures, meshes, animations and others. Avatar designers are, therefore, the residents who can create themselves and use parts that other residents share or sell. The way virtual corporality is constituted in this environment is very often the result of a distributed author-

ship and, therefore, a shared creative process.

A good example of this kind of approach is the work of designer Elif Ayiter AKA Alpha Auer (and others) who draws the contents of the brand alpha.tribe in SL. Countless artists have used her avatar designs for the creation of machinimas, virtual photography and performances. In her sister virtual installations Anatomia and body parts two sets of avatars were distributed as part of the artwork, relying on embodiment as a fundamental part of the aesthetical experience [7]. The author also created a series called The Avatar of the Uncanny Valley, for which she constructed a set of avatars constituted by elements made by other creators [8].

Eupalinos Ugajin is an SL based artist who uses his own avatar as artwork, adding a performative dimension to his approach. His very unusual avatars are designed using not only his own creations, but also artefacts made by others. He compiles these avatars in his Flickr set [SL] Will you AV me?<sup>6</sup>

If one thinks of the virtual body in the way Pierre Lévy refers to virtual, one has to acknowledge that virtual does not oppose real, but the term actual. Virtuality is not about possibility, but about potency. For this author, realization is not a creation, in the full sense of the term, because it doesn't imply the production of something new. The possible is just like the real but without an existence; the virtual, on the other hand, asks for a resolution, is problematic, complex. In this sense, actualization is a solution to a problem that goes far beyond the problem's statement. The actual is not predetermined by the virtual, as Lévy reminds us, it is not its realization, but an answer to it [9].

6. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/eupalinos/sets/72157622738211231>

## 2.1 . Virtual Body

Similarly, the virtual body doesn't oppose the real body, but the actual body. It is not a possible body, but a potential one, problematic and complex. Frank Biocca tried to unravel this complexity when researching bodily presence in virtual environments. He distinguished three different kinds of body: objective body, virtual body and body schema.

The objective body is the physical, observable, and measurable body of the user. The virtual body is the representation of the user's body inside the virtual environment. The body schema is

the user's mental or internal representation of her body [10]. Biocca's research led to the belief that the always-unstable phenomenal body could be radically altered by use of media [10]. This was confirmed by Nick Yee's, N. Jeremy Bailenson's, Ducheneaut's and Nicolas' findings, whose studies demonstrate that behaviour can change according to the avatar's body constitution, not only online but also in offline interactions, e.g. users of taller avatars performed better in negotiating with shorter avatars, with this effect persisting outside the virtual context. To these and other changes in behaviour resulting from the handling of avatars, the authors called Proteus Effect [11]. The impact of avatar design in the phenomenal body was also addressed by Jacquelyn Ford Morie, who highlights that in virtual environments "our experience is very much influenced by how we perceive our self, and yet, within most immersive environments as they exist today, this choice is still made by the VE designer" [12]. And also by Celia Pearce, who emphasizes the importance of avatar design in multi-user virtual environments:

If the avatar is framed as a form of personal expression, as performance medium, it is not hard to see the ways in which the components of the avatar kit dictate the forms of expression that occur [13].

Maeva Veerapen specifically studied the constitution of a phenomenal body while using an avatar in SL. She reminds us of the concomitance of two bodies in the virtual world, the user's and the avatar's, one organic, the other image. The resident's body has no direct access to the metaverse; she uses the avatar to interact with other people, objects and space. Yet the avatar is not sensorially or perceptually able, it is the user's body that senses and feels. So, how is the phenomenal body constituted between these two bodies? Veerapen advances three conceptions of the avatar: the avatar as prosthesis, as phantom limb and as equal [14].

A prosthesis extends the potential of the phenomenal body. As the resident cannot have direct and immediate access to the metaverse, the avatar becomes a prosthesis that extends the frontiers of the resident's body. Sometimes an amputee can have sensations in her missing limb, i.e. the phantom limb. Although the avatar never made part of the resident's body, it can lead to feelings other than by direct stimulation, e.g. activating the memory,

adding an emotional dimension to the virtual experience.

As demonstrated, the resident's body cannot fulfil all the tasks of a phenomenal body in the metaverse, since it does not have direct access to the virtual world. Neither can the avatar's body, as it is not yet sensorially and perceptually enabled.

That is how Veerapen arrives at the conception of the avatar as an equal. Across the physical body and the body of the avatar, we have all the qualities necessary to constitute a phenomenal body. This cannot, however, be a simple sum of the two bodies; it has to be their symbiosis.

This duplicity in the relations between users and virtual worlds is also addressed by Morie, who reminds us that as we enter the virtual world we are entering a world that is not completely imaginary, but still is “not fully based in solid physicality” either [12]. Corporality in virtual worlds juxtaposes two bodies and two conceptions of materiality, co-dependent on each other to constitute an entity. In order for the avatar to link in this way to the physical body it requires a metaphorical nature.

## **2.2 . Body As Metaphor**

Corporality as a metaphor, however, is not exclusive of virtual environments. Our bodily experience seems to considerably affect the way we conceive the world. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that the ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical — in fact, a significant part of our concepts are organized in terms of spatial metaphors: “I feel down”, “cheer up”, “he is out of reach”, “she is in love”, “I look forward to meet you”. Up / down, in / out, forward / backward, these metaphors are rooted deeply in our physical and cultural experience of the body [15].

Metaphors are also paramount to the way we handle computers — we “drag” items from one “window” to another or to our “desktop”, we archive data in “folders” or send them to the “trash”. In fact we are just providing commands to the computer, but we experience them through simulations, in a metaphorical way that is fundamental in the design of digital interaction [16]. In the same way the virtual body is a metaphorical one.

Body as metaphor, however, is not exclusive of virtual environments, as we saw before. Gender studies have long referred to a semiotized dimension of the body:

The body is a construction, a representation, a place where the marking of sexual difference is written, and it is because the body is a sign that it has been so invested in feminist politics as a site of our resistance [17].

The semiotic body plays an important role in our everyday life, but stripped of its physical component, the symbolic aspect of the body becomes prevalent in virtual environments. The avatar is a body of language and expression, open to further symbolic investments. One can choose the stereotype metaphor of gender, ethnicity, age, etc., or move beyond it and rethink, rebuild this metaphorical body.

Meta\_Boy avatars ranged from the realism of old Godiva to the transparent improbability of Chart Man, yet they never became entirely abstract, and they never lost their metaphorical dimension. By sharing them as transformable artefacts we intended to open this avatar language to different forms of expression. The embodiment of the avatar itself could become, simultaneously, an aesthetical experience and a creative process.

**F. 3/4** Godiva and Chart Man, Meta:Body avatars, both captures by CapCat Ragu



### **3 . Shared Creativity**

The Meta\_Body Project relies, in fact, on a particular creative process we call shared creativity, in which we cannot reduce creation to a single author. Several components of the project are built by different authors and producers, working together towards a flexible, unstable and always unfinished body of work. A creative flux fed by many streams that work in different creative processes, whose fluidity, in time, becomes independent and uncontrolled by



the project's initiators.

We distinguish, in this project, three different shared creative processes — collective creation, distributed creation, and collaborative creation. We are referring specifically to creative processes and not to group organization, as we will explain further on.

### **3.1 Collective Creation**

It is important to distinguish what we will be calling collective creation from the common use of the word collective, as referring to a group of people acting together in some way. What we aim to describe is a particular creative process that by no means undertakes all other different and meaningful aspects of collectivity. In fact an art collective does not necessarily have to use what we will be calling collective creation as a creative process. It can, and often does, use collaborative or distributed creativity. Our intent is to be able to refer to a creative process in which participants act as one creative entity.

The complete dissolution of one's identity in a group is utopian; a co-creative process where everyone is an equal partner in the process [18] is very difficult to achieve in large and medium groups. Working as plural organism requires a high level of intimacy between co-creators. An equal partnership basis has more chance of success in a cellular structure, in which each of the participants relinquishes hers/his own authorial mark in favour of the group's authorship [19].

This was the preferred process used by Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu to build the Meta\_Body avatars and virtual installations. This type of creative process requires complete openness to state your insecurities, fears, uncertainties and to speak your mind no matter what, knowing that the relationship won't break when you disagree. A high level of artistic respect for each other is absolutely required, but not sufficient: one needs complete trust to blindly give up one's creation to the other. It is a very intuitive process that relies on a very strong bond between creators.

Their work process is loosely organized. There is no established division of labour. Each begins to create an avatar and passes the material to the other, so she continues. Keeping this back and forth until both decide that the avatar is finished. The construction of an avatar in SL depends both on buildings within

7. Software of image edition for the creation of textures for the avatar skin, clothes and other objects. 3d modeling software to build objects that can be attached to the avatar, like hair, clothes parts and other props.

the platform, and other creations developed in other software<sup>7</sup> and then uploaded to the virtual world. Within the platform is easy to share objects and accumulate transformations, but many of the materials built outside the platform also circulate between each other before the upload.

After the avatars' building is time for distribution and a new stage of shared creativity begins.

### 3.2 . Distributed Creation

Pierre Lévy distinguishes two major types of virtual worlds: the limited and edited ones (off-line), and those accessible via a network and infinitely open to interaction, transformation and connection with other virtual worlds (online) [20]. The distinction between online and offline that Lévy suggests (note that the author stresses that this is not an opposition) is fundamental to the kind of work that is proposed: flux, process, metamorphic, co-constructed works. Although it also exists offline, this sort of work is typical of cyberculture [20]. We therefore speak of works whose authorship is distributed. The term was coined by the digital art pioneer Roy Ascott in 1986, to describe the interactive and remote authoring project *La Plissure du Texte: A Planetary Fairytale (LPDT)*, created in 1983.

For Axel Bruns, distributed creativity occurs in “projects which harness the creativity of a large range of participants to build on and extend an existing pool of artistic material” [21]. In this case, the set of avatars and all the artefacts related to them. He also developed the concept of *produsage* to acknowledge the new reality “emerging from the intersection of Web 2.0, user-generated content, and social media since the early years of the new milleni” [22]. He realized that the conventional sense of production, especially related to the industrial economy, no longer applied to “massively distributed collaborations [...] constantly changing, permanently mutable bodies of work which are owned at once by everyone and no-one” [20] in which the participants easily shift from users to producers and vice versa, originating a hybrid role in between.

He defines *produsage* “as a mode of collaborative content creation which is led by users or at least crucially involves users as producers – where, in other words, the user acts as a hybrid

user/producer, or produser, virtually throughout the production process” [6]. It is fundamental to be community-based, meaning a broad group with fluid-roles, not a team. Produsers can participate in different ways throughout an ongoing process, according to their personal skills, interests and knowledge, shifting from user to producer [6].

We built and distributed Meta\_Body avatars for free, transformable, copyable and sharable to the SL community, which in that platform is called “full perm” (short for “full permissions”). We produced content that others used to produce new content that they shared with us, which we in turn used for the AMIW exhibition (in the case of virtual photography and machinima) or to redistribute in new virtual installations (in the case of the Meta\_Body II avatars, produced by the users). The term produsage can, therefore, be considered appropriate to describe this project’s methodology.

In AMIW, machinimas were exhibited and videos were captured in SL, where their creators used Meta\_Body avatars (modified or not) as characters for their narratives. Virtual photography was also exhibited and this can take many forms: screen captures (post edited or not) from SL, where the residents use the avatars (modified or not) as models for their photographic artworks, or screen captures of very modified avatars, where the new derived avatar can also be considered the new artwork.

**F.5** Beneath the Stream  
by Deborah Lombardo  
AKA Harbor Galaxy,  
a virtual photography  
using an unmodified  
original Meta\_Body  
avatar, River Avatar, as  
a model.



In Meta\_Body II, having the first eighteen Meta\_Body project

avatars as a starting point , SL residents were invited to share their derived avatars using any one of the parts of the project Meta\_Body avatars, parts built by themselves and/or parts built by other developers , since its license specifically permitted copying, redistribution and transformation. All avatars should be provided with full permissions, which means they are now being distributed copyable, shareable and open to transformation.

Some creators recombined parts of the first avatars, as was the case Kikas Babenco, with your avatar Sophia, which combined parts of at least five in the building of an entirely new character. Other combined these parts with their own creations. This was the case of the avatar designed by alpha.tribe, which combined alpha.tribe's skin design with elements of the original avatars. However, these elements were so drastically modified that became almost unrecognizable, revealing the distinctive alpha.tribe's authorial mark.

**F. 6/7** Sophia by Kikas Babenco and alpha.tribe Meta\_Body avatar by alpha.tribe, Meta:BodyII avatars, both captures by Cap-Cat Ragu.



**F. 8/9** Ragdoll by Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu and Ragdohcchio by Veleda Lorakeet, both captures by Cap-Cat Ragu.

A particularly interesting case is that of the artist Veleda Lorakeet, who used solely the avatar concept, not using any parts of the original avatars, but only her own creations. Her avatar, Ragdohcchio , was conceptually based on one of the original avatars, Ragdoll — a rag doll , was turned into a wooden doll with similar characteristics .

### 3.3 . Collaborative Creation

Collaboration, as Maria Lind states, has been a “buzz” word in the artworld since the 1990's, and incorporates several methods of organization and a wide range of creative processes, it is an

“open-ended concept” and “becomes an umbrella term for the diverse working methods that require more than one participant” [23]. Collective creation and distributed creation are creative processes that can be used in different forms of collaboration. When we refer to collaborative creation we are not addressing the very wide term “colaboration”, but trying to describe a particular way of creating together, that differs from the ones we previously characterized. In this process each author retains her authorial mark and one can roughly distinguish each author’s work, even though it can blend in, making it difficult to define a borderline between each other. This kind of creation often happens as a dialogue between authors, where each creation is a response to other creation.

Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu sometimes use this creative process along with collective creation (even though they always co-sign everything), but this process is especially useful to describe how the duo worked with Takio Ra in building the Delicatessen sim for the distribution of derivative avatars in Meta\_Body II.

Takio Ra is the creator of the sound one can hear at Delicatessen region, through all four stages. He was invited by Meilo Minotaur and CapCat Ragu to make a sound intervention in the virtual installation built by them. Even though his work didn’t alter anything built by the couple, as all modelations and visual aspects of the work remained untouched, it radically altered the perception of the space and became a fundamental part of the project’s conceptualization. The sounds used are also being distributed with full permissions, feeding the distributed creation branch.

## **4 . Conclusions**

The building and embodiment of an avatar in SL is usually a shared creative process. Each resident is “born” into the world with one of the default avatars provided by the platform. Those that choose to explore this place in the metaverse, begin to transform their avatars very early on, building something that in some way expresses their identity. Some choose to create a virtual representation of their physical bodies, or an improved version of it; others prefer an idealized body of eternal beauty and youth. Some try to maintain a stable image of themselves, a fixed iden-

tity; others are shape shifters, always tearing themselves apart and reassembling their bodies. However people choose to embody their avatar, they always have to start from something provided by the platform. They can change it and rebuild it according to the customization allowed, which is very broad on SL, permitting inclusively the upload of original content. This way each resident constructs their unique avatar, with what the platform offers by default, with materials built by herself and/or with materials designed and provided by other residents. Stereotypical or surreal, all SL avatars are the result of a creative process that connects them to other creators: skin, cloth, hair designers, etc. Even someone who can't dominate any creative technology and builds her avatar only with materials designed by others needs a creative approach to choose and mix different materials in order to make her unique avatar.

**F10.** Video still of the compilation of virtual photographs exhibited in AMIW<sup>8</sup>, the image in the still is a Tim Deschanel capture of a Eupalinos Ugajin derived avatar.

On project *Meta\_Body* we focused on this creative aspect of embodiment and in the metaphorical nature of the avatar, a body/language open to experimentation.



8. <http://vimeo.com/31369231>

We provide eighteen avatars, which are not only offered, but also copiable, transformable and transferable, giving total freedom of use to producers. We use this term instead of public or audience, because this project promoted a creative and participatory relation with SL residents. As an artwork, *Meta\_Body* can only be fully grasped in the embodiment and transformation of the avatars, turning the aesthetical experience of the work into a creative process.

The selection of works we exhibited in Austria intended to be as inclusive as possible and not based on personal "taste". In-

stead, we aimed to depict the variety of sensibilities and cultures present in the art of the metaverse, and the multiple ways in which the original avatars were interpreted.

We went a step further on Meta\_Body II, inviting new creators to make and share in the same way a new set of 26 avatars, derived from the first one, spawning new branches in this never ending creative flux.

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