

# Journal of • Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

## Arts

June 2013  
Volume 6, No. 2



Art by: Catarina Carneiro de Sousa

# Volume 6, Number 2

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### June 2013

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Volume 6, Number 2

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June 2013

# Art Medium Too: Avatar, Art, and Assemblages

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## Abstract

This article looks at the connections between avatars and art and proposes avatars as an art medium and the assembling or creating of avatars as an art-making process. The term *assembling* is used to indicate that avatars are assemblages in that they are combinations of representations (images), and the process of constructing an avatar involves putting together body parts (and clothes). Framed by Deleuze and Guattari's idea of assemblage, avatar assembling constitutes the in-between space wherein new connections between art and identity play form and the possibility of a new art genre likewise takes shape. Three ways to conceive the connections between avatars and art are discussed. The first focuses on avatars as the subject of art, the second on avatars as performance art, and the third on connecting avatar reassembling with the process of art-making.

## 1. Introduction: Connecting Avatars and Art

Avatars are visual representations that people use as identities in virtual worlds (Meadows, 2008). As an important component of the online virtual world Second Life, avatars have been thought of as a way to experiment with different aspects of the self, especially new aspects and aspects that are usually hidden. Most research studies about avatars focus on identity play (e.g., Crockett, 2007; Franz, 2005; Hsiao, 2007; Klevjer, 2006; Webb, 2001), behaviors associated with avatar play (e.g., Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Jin, 2009; Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2010; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010; Vasalou, Joinson, Bänziger, Goldie, & Pitt, 2008), and self-presentation and expression (e.g., Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Sung, Moon, Kang, & Lin, 2011; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). However, little attention has been paid to the process of creating or assembling an avatar as constituting art-making. This article looks at the relationships between avatars and art and, through the findings of qualitative research interviews, proposes avatar assembling as an art-making process and avatars as an art medium.

To explore the connections between avatars and art, the term *avatar re/assembling* is framed in the context of assemblage art, and avatar assembling is defined based on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblage, which sees an assemblage as a collection of different things that functions to provide new possibilities. From that definition, three central and distinct connections between avatars and art are discussed in this article. The first two types of connections provide an important context within which to understand the virtual world and its relationship with the art world. The third type of connection provides a new perspective on possibilities for art-making in the virtual world. Figure 1 shows these three types of connections, how each conceives avatars as an art medium and how each connects to notions of identity. The three types of connections are also assemblages created by using avatars as an art medium. In other words, the medium creates artworks that explore identities in the digital age and breaks the boundaries between the real and the virtual, thus creating a mixed-reality process of art-making and thus mixed-reality art.

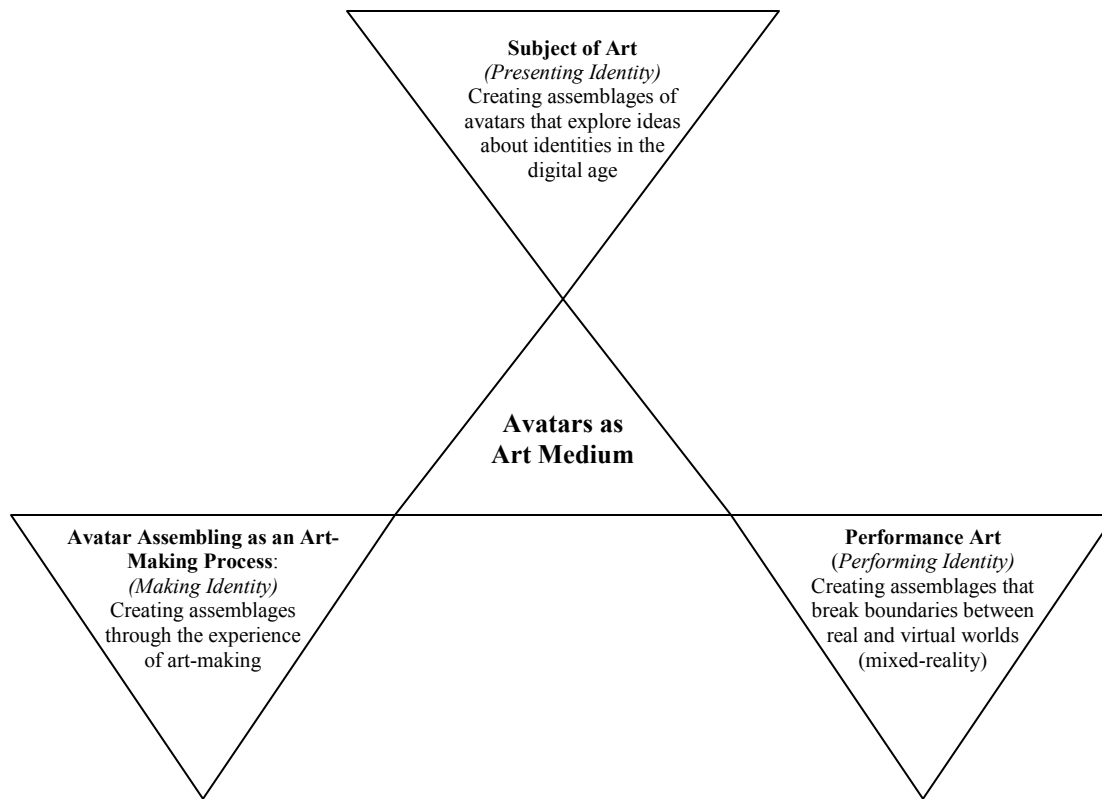


Figure 1: Three ways to conceive avatars as an art medium

## 2. What is Assemblage and Avatar Re/Assembling?

The process of creating an avatar is one that involves assembling body parts. A typical human body (the parts and aspects that are visible) consists of body shape, skin, hair, limbs, hands, feet, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, teeth, ears, nails, and, in most settings, clothing and accessories. These elements have been fully transferred to avatars in virtual worlds, where each element can be customized. Second Life (SL), for example, offers its participants an extensive and ever-growing range of body parts and clothing options to choose from as they create the look and shape through which to present themselves in this context. Creating an avatar involves choosing and/or customizing body parts and clothing, much like assembling a doll. In addition, in SL, avatars can be anything, including animals, fantasy creatures, and inanimate objects. Each avatar, therefore, can be seen as an *assemblage* of representations. Both the assemblage as a whole and the individual parts have meaning.

### 2.1 Assemblage in Art

Assemblage is an art genre that uses found images, ideas, and objects to create an artwork. It is closely connected to collage, an art form in which objects, such as newspaper clips, pieces of cloth, and/or other cultural fragments are assembled and attached to a surface in order to create references to life through sensory and representative fragments. Collage as an art form emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of modernism (Wolfram, 1975). Originating in Cubism and also associated with many other modern art movements, including Futurism and the Russian avant-garde, collage became an



important means of expression through the work of Dada (Wolfram, 1975). It became “an art which alone was concerned with the way people lived their lives” (Wolfram, 1975, p. 77). Continued in Surrealism, Neo-Dada, and Pop art, collage is regarded as a significant form of 20th-century art (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). According to Donald Barthelme, a writer of postmodernist fiction, “the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media” (quoted in Herzinger, 1997, p. 204; Schickel, 1970, p. 178). Collage’s use of juxtaposition has influenced many art forms, such as montages in film-making, Happenings in performance, and assemblages in sculpture. The term “assemblage” was first used as a way to describe art in 1953; French artist Jean Dubuffet called his works *assemblages d’empreintes* in order to reserve the term collage for works by Picasso, Braque, and the Dadaists (Seitz, 1961). The term was adopted for *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961 “as a generic concept that would include all forms of composite art and modes of juxtaposition” (Seitz, 1961, p. 150). According to Seitz (1961), “the term ‘assemblage’ ... [was] singled out, with this duality in mind, to denote not only a specific technical procedure and form used in the ... arts, but also a complex of attitudes and ideas” (p. 10). Further, “assemblage is a method with disconcertingly centrifugal potentialities” (p. 84). Assemblage’s power lies in its ability to touch different experiences and emotions through its unexpected materials and objects to which each viewer can connect in his or her own way.

The term *avatar re/assembling*, therefore, is used to refer to creating avatars through an art-making process that relates directly to the genre of assemblage. Connecting the making of avatars to the making of assemblages serves two purposes. First, it emphasizes the purposefulness, complexity, and creativity inherent in presenting an avatar. Second, it presents avatar re/assembling from a critical position, one based on Garoian and Gaudelius’s (2008) idea about “the critical pedagogy of collage, montage, assemblage, installation, and performance art” (p. 1). These art genres create disjunctive narratives and in-between spaces that explore the potentialities of multiplicity critical to any attempt to challenge the dominant visual culture.

## 2.2 Deleuzian Assemblage

The in-between space created by assemblage art is also the abstract line that Deleuze (2006) describes in explaining his concept of assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari do not use the term assemblage to refer to the art genre, but there are similarities between these two uses. The term assemblage refers to the idea of putting together pieces of heterogeneous things. An assemblage is constituted by many different lines, and they state:

*“An abstract line is a line with no outlines, a line that passes between things, a line in mutation.... It is very much alive, living and creative.... An assemblage is carried along by its abstract lines, when it is able to have or trace abstract lines” (p. 178).*

In other words, the assemblage is produced by abstract lines – by the in-between, a space where creative new possibilities can be fulfilled.

The concept of assemblage proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is one that addresses “the play of contingency and structure, organization and change” (Wise, 2005, p. 77). Multiple components can combine to form assemblages that perform different functions. As with artwork, assemblages combine components in a variety of ways. Thus, assemblages inhere in multiplicity. They have no shape, and “their ‘law’ is rather the imperative of endless experimentation, metamorphosis, or transmutation, alignment and realignment” (Grosz, 1994, p. 167). If an avatar is viewed as an assemblage, then, avatar re/assembling is always in-between, because in the process of re/assembling,

avatars are continually constructed and reconstructed. There is no fixed ending, only a flow of changes. Understanding avatars and the connections between avatars and art through the Deleuzian idea of assemblage reveals the new potentialities that avatars as a medium can bring to both the art world and the virtual world.

### 3. Art Assembles Avatars

Because avatar play often necessarily involves exploring identity, artworks that use avatars as a focus usually consider the explicit relationship between avatars and notions of identity. Long before Second Life, new media artists were exploring the idea of avatar assembling. Victoria Vesna's Net art project *Bodies INCorporated* (see <http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu/> to view the Net art piece) is a pioneer example of this idea. This project, first exhibited in 1996, allows people to log on to the site and build 3D bodies from different components. A description of the project's mission states: "Bodies INCorporated is a project that actively incorporates the idea of avatars, with the intention of shifting the discourse of the body from the usual idea of flesh and identity" (Vesna, 1996, Mission Statement, para. 1).

On the website, avatar bodies can be assembled from a range of sounds and textures like black rubber, blue plastic, and bronze. Each texture is described in terms of its characteristics, such as "hot and dry; it will sublime at a relatively low temperature; fashion and style element" (Vesna, 1996, Textures, para. 1). These assembled avatar bodies function as "data containers on the network and allow users both to represent themselves as a container of various kinds of information and to search information contained in other bodies" (Paul, 2003, pp. 168–169).

The purpose driving avatar-body-making in this project differs from that driving avatar creation in SL. In *Bodies INCorporated*, the bodies are not used to perform any task, but to form a collection. In SL, the bodies stand in for the bodies of the users, project something about the users, and function as a means of communication between users. As one of the first artworks to discuss issues pertaining to the body, technology, and identity through avatar-making in cyberspace, *Bodies INCorporated* is a collaborative project in which a person's avatar not only contains his/her own message, but also contributes to the creation of a greater community body. This creates knowledge about the assembled bodies in cyberspace. Vesna (1997) created this work because she saw "a need for alternate worlds to be built with more complex renditions of identity and community building ... [instead of] simply replicating the existing physical structures or hierarchies" (para. 12). In other words, she imagined a utopian world without societal constraints.

Extending the ideas of *Bodies INCorporated*, which uses collaborative avatar-making to create new bodies, *World of Female Avatars* (see <http://females.mur.at/> to view the Net art piece), created by Evelin Stermitz, Jure Kodzoman, Ljiljana Perkovic, and Loritz Zbigniew, provides an assemblage of female bodies. The project asks visitors to submit images of and texts about the female body that make a personal statement. These images and texts are saved on the site to create "the avatar of female bodies" (Stermitz, Kodzoman, Perkovic, & Zbigniew, 2004, para. 1). The new bodies constitute an assemblage of female identities.

One well-known work focused on avatars in SL is *Portraits of Avatars* (see <http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/portraits/index.html> for more information about this piece), created between 2006 and 2007 by Eva and Franco Mattes ([www.0100101110101101.org](http://www.0100101110101101.org)). The artists took pictures of avatars/people in SL and enlarged them for exhibitions in both SL and real-life galleries in several countries where thereby created a project that explores the relationship between identity and

virtual representation (see the “Most Beautiful Avatars” series of the *Portraits of Avatars* exhibit as posted in the Postmasters Gallery, New York at [http://www.postmastersart.com/archive/01org\\_07/01org\\_07\\_install.html](http://www.postmastersart.com/archive/01org_07/01org_07_install.html)). Art critic Domenico Quaranta (2007) states:

*“What happens if we are given the option of customizing that avatar, and my mission becomes that of constructing a second life in the virtual space I have access to? ... What happens is that the avatar becomes something more than a puppet following my orders: it becomes the projection of my identity in a public space, the appearance that I wish to have when I emerge from my private space. It becomes the mask I have constructed to interface with the environment (be it real or virtual) that I inhabit. Since its outset, the aim of the portrait genre has been to immortalize this mask, or in other words, to construct avatars.” (para. 8)*

The assemblage work of avatar portraits provided a basis for raising discussions on avatar and identity.

Based on concepts created by *Portraits of Avatars* and the avatars in SL, *1000+ Avatars* was created between 2011 and 2012 by Kristine Schomaker and Gracie Kendal. This project extends ideas about playing with the connections between avatars and identity. Schomaker takes pictures of SL avatars, both front and back. And, though she does sometimes post the fronts of avatars on her blog, it is the back views that dominate the display area in her studio (The *1000+ Avatar* project blog <http://1000avatars.wordpress.com/> presents partial images of avatars from the project and further information about the project). According to Schomaker, her project is about “the idea of online anonymity.” She states:

*“I started out with one idea: to take portraits of avatars facing away from me. That was it, pure and simple. I had the idea that I wanted them to be unrecognizable, their faces hidden, just another level of anonymity in SL vs. RL” (Schomaker, 2011, paras. 6–7).*

The result of her project is a giant assemblage of avatars that functions as spectacle. According to Guy Debord (1967/2005), “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (p. 7). Her project highlights the fact that images are the most focused way to represent identity online. Though this is partly due to the design of the technology, the focus on avatar representations in the virtual world reinforces the idea that the image *is* the meaning.

These artworks either ask audiences to create avatars or to assemble existing avatars in order to emphasize the connection between avatars and identity. These assemblages, thus, function as a mirror that reflects our understanding of and practices in regard to avatar creation. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, assemblage is both content and expression, and these artworks both include avatars and explore issues relating to them.

#### **4. Performing Avatars, Performing Assemblages, Performing Art**

Some artworks that predate SL, such as *Bodies INCorporated*, feature avatars as a central theme. However, as SL became popular as a site where artists and others could perform through avatars, the idea of creating performance art started to emerge. Performance art, in this context, means works that have a direct connection with the performance art movement stemming from ideas introduced by Dada, Happenings, Fluxus, and Situationist International artists. Situationist International was a group of artists who sought to “redefine revolutionary praxis... [They proposed] a critique of capitalism that weighted heavily in favor of the spontaneous realization of the revolutionary potential of everyday life” (Burkowicz, n.d., para. 1). Performance art here does not refer to musical, dance, or theatrical



performances in the context of this article. They are popular kinds of performance, and they are certainly authentic art forms. However, they are not the focus of this article.

Early virtual performance artists include Cao Fei, Eva and Franco Mattes, Second Front, Gazira Babeli, and Micha Cárdenas (see more information about Micha Cárdenas at <http://transreal.org>, her personal website). Theorist, artist, and curator Patrick Lichty (2008) claimed that “virtual world art is part of a historical arc of work that engages social relations” (para. 2). He proposed three theoretical frameworks for art created in and through online virtual environments such as SL. These three frameworks are Allan Kaprow’s Happenings, Joseph Beuys’s idea of social sculpture, and Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics. Happenings and relational aesthetics help to explain avatars as performance art.

Happenings are performance artworks, acts, or events with roots in the 1950s and 1960s. They usually involve audience participation and emphasize the ways in which they are connected with the spaces designated for performance. A leading figure of Happenings, artist Allan Kaprow, presented two guidelines for this kind of performance:

*“(A) The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible....  
(B) The source of themes, materials, actions, and the relationships between them are to be derived from any place or period except from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu”  
(Kaprow, 1995, p. 197).<sup>1</sup>*

These points provide a foundation for perceiving virtual worlds as media because virtual worlds are part of many people’s daily-life experiences. And, as Lichty (2008) noted, virtual worlds operate according to many of the principles of Happenings, such as “variability of time, indistinctness of audience, and uniqueness of moment” (para. 4).

Avatars reside in and form a constituent part of virtual worlds. Thus, they are a medium and interface for social interactivity and the site of Happenings in cyberspace. This is best illustrated by Eva and Franco Mattes’ *Synthetic Performances* project in SL. They use their avatars to reenact performances by artists such as Marina Abramovic, Joseph Beuys, Guilbert and George, Valie Export and Peter Weibel, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden. The Matteses’ performances through their avatars touch the potentially potent affect of the virtual body. Their avatars create conceptual and emotional connections with audiences. For example, in one performance, featured in PERFORMA07 in New York in November 2007 (*Synthetic Performances* by Eva and Franco Mattes can be seen here: <http://youtu.be/C8aTHkjaOF8>), the Matteses used their avatars to reenact Abramovic’s 1977 performance *Imponderabilia*.

In the original performance (<http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1974>), Abramovic and Ulay stood naked at the entrance to an exhibition. In order to enter the exhibition, each person was obliged to choose between facing a naked male body or facing a naked female body. The reactions of the audiences to these performances varied. Each audience responded differently; there was laughter, hesitation, and uncertainty. Some passed between the artists’ nude avatars several times. In such a way, the avatar performance reveals the effect of the avatar as a body capable of evoking conceptual and emotional responses on the part of others. The artists’ virtual bodies created an in-between space and medium through which the audiences interacted with the work. Their performance was a virtual Happening consisting of their avatars and their interactions in the virtual world.

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Kaprow created seven rules for Happenings. Here, I only quote the first two, because Lichty (2008) used these to explain virtual world art. See Kaprow (1995) for the other rules.

Although their virtual Happenings were drawn from the work of performance artists, their work does not contradict Kaprow's guidelines. Because their performances were among the first of their kind in the virtual environment, the milieu differs from that of other Happenings. Their borrowing of the performances offered by other artists creates a reference to art that renders the performance an effective statement about the ways in which avatars and the virtual world can be used as art media.

Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) relational aesthetics creates another foundation for understanding avatar performance. Relational aesthetics, according to Bourriaud, judges "artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt" (p. 112). The role of artworks, accordingly, "is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist" (p. 13). Avatars can be media for creating relational art because virtual bodies are not just images. Instead, they interact with other bodies. For example, Chinese artist Cao Fei in her project for the 52nd *Venice Biennale* used her avatar, China Tracy, to perform the machinima (movies made in 3D virtual environments) documentary *i.Mirror* (see the three-part machinima video *i.Mirror* at <http://www.youtube.com/user/ChinaTracy>), in which the artist detailed her experiences within and feelings about SL and explored how she started to confuse her two lives (Culp, 2008). Her avatar body forms a relationship with others who are part of her SL, with audiences who view her work in the machinima form, and further, with her own physical body. Her performance through her avatar body creates a relationship between herself and others.

Avatar performances can be seen as creating assemblages. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain that assemblage connects to territoriality but also to deterritorialization. Each avatar performance functions in its own way to create territory. In other words, each performance demonstrates the idea of embodying avatars to create art. The art is a mixed reality that incorporates both virtual and real worlds. The performance simultaneously creates a new domain for art and deconstructs accepted ideas about what it means to perform through the body.

## 5. Avatar Assembling as Art Process

The first two categories include many artworks/performances related to the virtual world and to avatars. These works are not fixed objects, nor do they provide only one way to explore the meanings of and the ideas driving the works. The third way to understand the connection between avatars and art is through conceiving avatar re/assembling as an art-making process. This perspective came from qualitative research findings on the experience of avatar re/assembling in SL. The data presented here are drawn from the findings of a larger empirical study involving different avatar-creating experiences and includes interviews with SL fashion bloggers and with SL users who have non-human avatars. SL fashion bloggers were chosen as one of the focal groups because they frequently change and reassemble their avatars, replacing body parts and clothes frequently in order to re-create their avatars. SL users with non-human avatar representations were chosen because their avatar-creating experience involves an explicitly creative expression of identity. Five experienced SL fashion bloggers, each of whom had at least six months' experience with avatar re/assembling, and five people with non-human avatars were interviewed.

The study found that most participants consider their avatar-assembling experience to either constitute or to be similar to art-making, and likewise most consider their avatars to either constitute or to be similar to art. Whether or not the avatars are recognized as art, for most participants, avatar assembling provides art-making experience similar to that associated with other types of art-making.

Although the findings center on the participants' art-making experiences through avatar re/assembling, it is important to note that these experiences should be considered together with the identity expression and exploration experiences investigated in numerous research studies (Peachey & Childs, 2011). For many users, avatars are their identities or projected identities (Gee, 2003). In making an identity or projecting an identity, such users are involved in a process similar to art-making. Thinking from another perspective, they are constructing identities through art. The connections between identity play and art-making make avatars a unique medium.

### 5.1 Process of Art-Making

Although some participants do consider their avatars/avatar images to be art, most consider avatar re/assembling to be only similar to the process of art-making. One SL fashion blogger participant, Brooke, compares the process of creating her avatar image to the process an artist goes through to create art. Like other types of artists, Brooke usually has a vision that she is striving to realize—a vision that “will often convey something, a message, a feeling, etc.” (Brooke, personal communication, October 28, 2009). She also commented that through creating her avatar she had gained a knowledge of art elements, such as lighting, color, and composition, and learned how to incorporate them into her avatar representation, just as artists do in their work.

Similarly, other participants also use their avatars to express their artistic ideas. Mo, a participant who uses a non-human avatar and who has created many non-human avatars, stated that she “wants to create images [avatars] [because it] is my kind of artistic desire to realize an image visually” (Mo, personal communication, October 10, 2009). Extending the idea of achieving the ideal image, another participant, Violet, who also uses a non-human avatar, not only re/assembles her avatar in order to realize an imaginative idea, but she also writes stories about her avatar. Her avatar can be considered as a way of illustrating her narratives. She describes her avatar assembling as part of the process through which she writes creative stories. Avatar re/assembling provides these participants with a way to engage in what they think of as art-making. It is a creative outlet for these participants.

### 5.2 To Assemble an Avatar is to Create a Work of Art

Some SL bloggers consider their avatar images to be artworks and the process through which they created their avatars to be essentially the same as the process through which what is recognized as art is created. One of the SL bloggers, Stella, stated:

*“I feel like I’m painting a picture. Especially with my photography. I love to showcase as much as I can of this beautiful virtual world, and until I decide to start creating things of my own, my photos and individual style are my art here” (Stella, personal communication, March 22, 2010).*

Another blogger, Carlie, also considered her avatar creation and photographs of her avatar to be art, because she understood the creation of the pictures to be an art-making process:

*“I am also an aspiring photographer in real life, so that is my way of making my art because I don’t think I am a very good painter or a drawer. I love to take pictures. So my art, I guess you would say, and my biggest art and the art that I can say I would hang this on the wall and 100% probably are my pictures both from Second Life and real life” (Carlie, personal communication, March 24, 2010).*

It is important to note that these SL fashion bloggers not only re/assemble their avatars, they also take pictures of their avatar creations (assemblages of styles), and even create backgrounds as part of their picture composition. Then they post these “fashion-magazine” pictures on their blogs. Stella states

that the process of assembling her avatar is like painting a picture, and it is only when she has taken pictures of her avatar that she considers her painting complete. Carlie is certain that her avatar assemblage is art, not just “like” art. And, according to Raphael, who uses a non-human avatar, avatars are art because each avatar assemblage incorporates a unique combination of ideas that the person who created it wants to express.

### 5.3 Summary

Connecting avatar assembling with art-making provides another perspective through which to understand the relationship between avatars and art. Although few of the participants think of themselves as “artists,” their avatar re/assembling practice involves them in the experience of creating art pieces. This is important because their experience of avatar re/assembling positions avatars as an art medium, such that everyone can originate art-making experiences through this medium. Unlike the examples of the first two types of avatar–art connections, this third type of connection usually stems from amateur art practice. These participants’ practice of using an avatar as a medium to create avatar pictures or to realize their ideas is not generally considered to be art-making, professional or otherwise. However, the kind of art (images) they produce connects with the work and experience of many others who have also created avatars to which they make changes, either continually or from time to time.

## 6. Conclusion: Forming More Assemblages

Avatars are not just images or representations of identities in virtual worlds. They are assemblages that function at numerous levels. Some function as a way to express the self, and others function as a means to experiment with different identities, but they are not absolute. Many have several functions, among which serving as an art medium is just one. Avatars and art have many connections, and each connection can form an assemblage that is meaningful in one way or another. The connections can serve as a way to expose issues behind new technology and culture, such as those explored by Victoria Vesna, Eva and Franco Mattes, and Kristine Schomaker. The artworks are also creative assemblages that break through art boundaries. The performance art acts discussed are all boundary-breaking pieces that mix virtual (avatar) and real (performer behind the avatar) in the creation of mixed-reality art.

Seeing avatars as an art medium opens up the potentiality for different interpretations of art and of the self. Because of their deep connection with identity exploration, avatars as an art medium constitute works that inevitably express ideas about identity. In connection with identity, using avatars as the subject of art, such as in Kristine Schomaker’s work, is not dissimilar to performing avatars, such as in Cao Fei’s work, or assembling avatars to create images that express the self, such as in SL fashion bloggers Stella’s and Carlie’s work. Identity issues ultimately become the texture that will always be present in artwork created using avatars as a medium.

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