

# **AIKATERINI ANTONOPOULOU**

## **Monsters and Machines: The avatar performance as the carnivalesque of the digital age**

### **Abstract**

The depiction of the body has never been merely a composition of an image, but it always carried with it a series of meanings and connections. Two or three-dimensional, in painting or in cinema or in virtual worlds, moving or static, the body has always been the place where the material world meets the conceptual world and other 'virtual' realities, and where physicality meets the subject's ideas, fears, hopes and desires. The aim of this essay is to examine the construction of the avatar body as the 'new monstrous' of the digital age, to read the avatar performance in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and it raises the question as to what it is to feel at 'home' within digitisation.

The digital age is marked by a series of juxtapositions: on the one hand we augment the human body through electronic devices in order to respond to hybrid environments and, on the other hand, we create digital spaces in which we interact via our representatives – our avatars. These theoretical displacements from physical to virtual and from body to mind – theoretical because during both the construction of the avatar and the experience of cyberspace there is always a physical body attached to the subject – call us to rethink issues of matter and corporeality, and to question the body's place in the world anew.

If, within the emergence of new technologies, 'we are all cyborgs' (Haraway, 1991a: 150), then the human body becomes a technobiological object, a hybrid construction of wo/man and machine, and a powerful promising image of new subjectivity. Against a static and coherent understanding of the body but also a pre-given and fixed world, cyborgs open up into prosthetic extensions and digital connections, as well as to multiple digital and physical profiles that project realities and future imaginaries. They do so in order to create hybrid assemblages of organisms and machines and to establish links with others and with their environment. These contemporary monsters, as swarms of machines and connections and similarly to the monsters of the past, challenge the 'natural' to suggest new, as Haraway puts it, 'possible worlds' (1991b: 22). Extending this line of study, this essay examines the construction of the avatar body as the 'new monstrous' of the digital age and attempts a reading of avatar performance in the context of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. By arguing that the body is radically dispersed within the context of digitisation, it raises the question as to what it is to feel at 'home'.

### **The Monstrous and the Carnivalesque**

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world (Bakhtin, 1984: 317).

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a non-static, ever-developing entity 'in the act of becoming'. Against the closed, geometrical, classical body of a unitary nature that refers to a certain cosmic order, the grotesque body escapes the limits of its surface to establish connections with the world and to intervene in this order. In this way it becomes a 'building material' to compose the cosmos and merge with natural phenomena as part of the entire universe (Bakhtin, 1984: 313, 318). Most generally, and opposing to classical aesthetics, the monstrous enables free play with the human body and its organs, and as such it is built upon either 'the fragmentation of the body' or on the 'multiplicity within unity – the fear of the "many in one"' (Dorrian, 2000: 310). With regards to the reference on roots and origins, the monstrous according to Aristotle is that which denies its parenthood and rejects the authority of its father (Dorrian, 2000: 310). Since the coherence, the unity, and the connection to the past of the body break down, classifications and

discriminations of all kinds and also assigned roles and places collapse. The monstrous stands against any closed network of references in favour of an open-ended and transgressive construction of a body. And since the conventional, well-defined, organic body represents a microcosm of the well-ordered universe, the monstrous body, conversely, reflects a world of disproportionality, multiplicity and fragmentariness; as a world without a distinct beginning or an end, where everything is possible.

The medieval carnival attempted to project this grotesque imagery and to take the 'inner meaning' of the world, in its good and bad aspects, out to the surface. Bakhtin sees the carnival as life re-shaped according to patterns of play (1984: 7). The strong element of play, the carnival's inclusive character, and the fact that it did not separate actors from spectators, suggested a different, nonofficial experience of the world. And since there was absolutely no practical or utilitarian connotation in this, everyone had the chance to escape their everyday life, their oppressions and their fears, and enter a utopian realm. This droll projection of everydayness thus became the people's weapon against everyday fears, and most importantly the fear of death, making man of the Middle Ages realize the world to its full extent.

Within a jesting atmosphere, the carnival imposed the abolition of all social hierarchy and a world turned 'inside out', dominated by folk humour. The transformation of the human body begun with the concealment of the face: the mask became the object that marked the transition to the grotesque and the medium that put all conventional categorizations in suspension. Behind the mask, all people were considered equal: community, freedom, equality and abundance were the features of the carnival that blurred the boundaries between the utopian ideal and the realistic. Among its multiple symbolisms, the mask is associated with transition, metamorphosis and the transgression of physical boundaries, but also stands as a symbol of the reincarnation. Following the hidden face, the travesty of the body's appearance and its degeneration reflected social and historical transformation. The renewal of clothes symbolized the renewal of the social system and in that way all hierarchic levels were reversed: wearing the clothes inside out and the trousers on the head implied this shift from top to bottom and the degradation to the bodily lower stratum. This transformation of everyday life celebrated the constant renewal of the body and the world, and also death and rebirth – the cycle of life.

Aiming at turning fear and darkness into joy and brightness through laughter and play, the aesthetics of the carnival grotesque is the aesthetics of the monstrous. Exaggeration, hyperbolism and excessiveness are the principle attributes of the grotesque style. Contrary to the finished, complete and cleansed classic ideals, the carnival body is incomplete and ever developing. The grotesque images are peculiar, unfinished and constantly renewed [1], providing a unique mixture of traditional contents and new meanings: projections of copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration and dismemberment, which constitute the bases for this transformation (Bakhtin, 1984: 25). The body may be ugly and repulsive, but aims at travestying the images of bodily life and everyday human existence. It becomes a caricature with fantastic dimensions, opening up a satirical world. Extraordinary human beings are the canon here, bodies of mixed parts, half-human and half-animal creatures, giants, dwarfs and pygmies (Bakhtin, 1984: 345). Through the mask, the human face also becomes a field of experimentation: the mouth and the nose become expressively grandiose, adopting animal forms or shapes of other objects, while the protruding eyes become a very important feature of the grotesque imagery.

This free play of the human body and its organs suggests a continuous act of becoming. The grotesque image is an unfinished phenomenon of transformation. It plays with the new and the old, the beginning and the end. The body here is not at all a private, self-centred form, separated from the other beings. Instead, it is open-ended and unlimited, inseparable from its world. It blends with other bodies and with the non-human. Either this is the sacred and the divine or the animal and the object; as such it represents the world in total rather than its individual self. Most generally, the body opens up to the world – it becomes cosmic, part of the world. In this universal freedom, the carnival grotesque aims at liberating man from any conventional and established truth, putting them in a position to re-define things in a different order. It is within this world that the body feels 'at home and has nothing to fear.

### **The Body as a Swarm of Machines**

The transition from the organic body to the enhanced and extended body – either physically through prosthetics or mentally through connectivity – has turned anyone who participates into the digital age into a new kind of monstrous construction that may not necessarily appear physically deformed and modified. However, s/he will still gather the many within itself. The human body becomes a technological object that connects in new ways to others and to its environment.

In Donna Haraway's cyborg metaphor, the human body transcends the dichotomies between organism and machine, animal and human, nature and culture. Its material and conceptual structures come into question, and technology becomes integral to its construction and conceptualization. The 'new body' can be anything, organic and/or mechanic, material and/or virtual, isolated and/or connected to others, and opens up to possibilities of bringing together organisms, mechanisms, concepts, social bodies, and collectivities. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari see the world as a swarm of machines: machines that drive machines and are driven by others, machines building connections and disconnections, and machines assembling themselves and constructing an identity and an image of their own. The body itself becomes at the same time a machine and a system of

machines, and the world previously divided into 'natural' and 'constructed' (or 'physical' and 'digital' in the context of digitisation) is now analysed into a system of machines and their connections. The term 'machine' is not here to necessarily suggest artificiality, but instead to escape the polarity between the natural and the artificial. The body as machine can be anything, so that the physical world translates into a line of production: machines that use raw materials, process them, and reject others.

Deleuze and Guattari developed the concept of desiring machines in the early 1970s, many years before the evolution of the Internet and the emergence of cyberspace. By this they attempted to overcome the dualism between the organic and the non-organic and to reconstruct an idea of the world as network and relation. Long before the creation of the first digital avatar, they studied the body in its environment in the context of connections. The body here is regarded alternatively as engaged in processes of production and consumption, in connection with itself and its environment, and constantly at work. Organic parts and prosthetic extensions work equally at this open-ended scheme. In recent times, new technologies have made the connections between the networks of the body and the wider networks of the world much more apparent. The extended body can be easily read as a machine connected to other machines connected to the world. Electronic connections tend to transform every aspect of contemporary life and by extension the conceptualisation of the body and its relations to identity and to place. For some, 'body has been replaced as the principal site of power by our profile' (Buchanan, 2009: 144). Our digital inscriptions are sometimes more important than our physical presence, and this makes desiring machines a key to understanding the world. However, cyberspace is not merely an alternative to the physical world; instead it becomes a technologically mediated representational space that affects and is affected by this physical world. In this context, it is important to question what our digital personae, being the body's digital recreations and always in a complex interaction with it, have to say about us.

Avatars have in effect become expressions of the multiplicity manifested in the digital age and a visualisation of the many carried within the one. The study of the avatar construction is significant here not only as a form of cultural critique but, most importantly, as a medium to understand both body (whose field of action is radically dispersed) and place (the 'where-ness' of being), in an increasingly complex world.

### **The Avatar and the Grotesque**

Tracing its origins from the incarnation of Hindu deities (Little, 1999), and having become popular through science fiction stories and virtual reality games, the term avatar stands for the appropriate representation of the self in a given environment. The creation of the avatar is the creation of a projection – an image – that acts as a delegate and a transmitter of signification into this other, 'parallel' world. As a representation of the original body, the avatar is thus always inseparable from it, a 'strap on' visual agent that represents the user and is always subject to the user's choices for identity, appearance, and behaviour (Little, 1999). Although dependent on the user, the avatar is not a mere double, as its construction involves a complex selective process of pairing opposite entities such as the corporeal and the immanent, the real and the imagined, the established and the desired, the represented and the representation. As such, it expresses certain aspects of the

subject: sometimes it reveals unknown characteristics to the subject, while at other times it reflects its Virtual Reality experiences back to the subject, so that the two engage in a dynamic relationship.

In her paper 'Technics of the Subject: The Avatar Drive' (2008), Emily Apter reflects on the technical constructions of the subject and defines the avatar as: 'a way of construing the ontology of "what-ness" and "who-ness", or the "It in the I" of agency, once the subject is framed as cognitive and affective algorithm, or a systemic configuration of the drives'. According to Apter, since any expression of the self constitutes a self-selective process – and as such is subject to various factors and dependent on many others – the avatar acts as a totem and a 'puppet-homunculus', 'less a second self or alter-ego than an animal companion or emblem' (2008). Thus the avatar identity is not a fixed identity, drawing references sometimes from the materiality, others from the imaginary, and others from the unconscious of the subject. At issue here is not only the opportunity for re-construction and self-transformation that the user has, but also the aspect of 'play' involved in the process and the impression that whatever one does has no consequences in the real world. All these activate the 'It' within the subject, a force 'beyond intelligible grasp' that conducts both the user's decisions and his experiences: 'the "itness" of "I" underscores the element of foreignness within the subject, a force-field of blind energy that serves as thought's predicate'. She continues: 'Thinking as "itness", other to or outside of self-consciousness becomes key to any theory of subject technics' (Apter, 2008). This 'It' becomes a causative force, a 'desubjectivated' agent, beyond our understanding, that drives the drive (Apter, 2008). Thus the avatar becomes the concretization of the mechanism of the drive, and as such it stands between personalization and independence, not so much a double but rather a proxy for the subject. Then, going back to the model of a body that is open-ended and constructed through multiple connections, the avatar becomes one of its extensions, and a delegate, sometimes visualizing and others masking the drive and its relations to the subject. As such, it invests the virtual world with meanings and then it enables us to inhabit these real-world-driven, yet representational worlds.

The immateriality of digital environments suggests a lighter existence and a greater freedom in construction as well as in interaction. In this context, the avatar body functions as a filter creating a shield of anonymity, invisibility, and multiplicity, but it also enables the interaction between the physical and the representational condition. Therefore the construction of the avatar is regarded here as a new form of experimentation on the grotesque body, a reconfiguration of the carnivalesque for the digital age, and thus as a key in decoding the [cyborg] body and its world. Due to their complex relation with the physical world as described above, virtual worlds combine the real-world experience with the users' desires and imaginaries to create an alternative domain of endless possibilities and play, an environment that, similarly to the carnival in the Middle Ages, offers an escape from any societal and physical limitations of the everyday life. The play between life and art that the carnival creates, its temporality, and the fact that it suggests a spectacle not to be watched but experienced, makes its juxtaposition with virtual environments very significant. As Bakhtin states, 'the carnival is the people's second life, organized on the base of laughter' (Bakhtin, 1984: 8). In both cases the way that the body is transformed, inscribed, produced and replicated represents the multiple visions of the self and questions its place within the universe.

In Virtual Reality, the user-computer interface takes the role of the mask that stands for the threshold from the physical to the representational and transforms fragments of the physical world into this 'other' reality of cyberspace. The subject translates into an avatar body that is open into infinite possibilities, drawing its references from reality and imagination, fears, hopes, and desires of the conscious and the unconscious. The rapidly changing environments created within the cyberspace, and the impression that one can easily log out of this world and erase everything immediately, increase the temporal character of this new world and emphasize the spectacles of the moment. On the other side of the interface, similarly to the carnival, everybody is considered equal and all classifications are potentially suspended. Eccentric performance comes to play here: Tasrill Sieyes, an avatar in Second Life [2] whose appearance changes from a three-dimensional reproduction of Marcel Duchamp's famous painting 'Nude Descending the Staircase' (fig.1) into a purple fox with octopus tentacles (fig.2), then into a black barbed-coiled creature (fig.3), and then to a chrome-surfaced anthropomorphic form (fig.4), argues that she has never been happy when confined within the limits of anthropomorphic avatars. Instead she loves experimenting with different forms and references and creating abstract avatars: 'When I am abstract, I don't have to worry about the preconceived notions of gender, race, or anything else but someone's view on abstract art. I can just be pure intellect' (Au, 2007a). With genetic heredity being non-existent here, and race and sexual orientation being mere checkboxes in the creation of the avatar, cyberspace becomes this place for freedom and the realization of the ideal – an escape from everydayness and its oppressions. In here, as in the carnival, the world can be turned upside-down and inside out – deconstructed to its basic components and reconstructed anew.

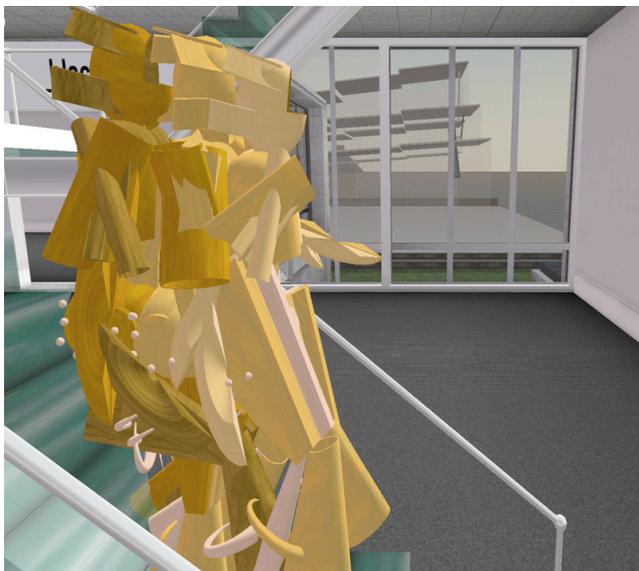


Fig. 1: 'Nude Descending the Staircase', Au, 'All About My Avatar: Tasrill Sieyes'



Fig. 2: Purple Fox, Au, 'All About My Avatar: Tasrill Sieyes'.



Fig. 3: Barbed-Coiled Creature, Au, 'All About My Avatar: Tasrill Sieyes'.



Fig. 4: Chrome-Surfaced Anthropomorphic Creature, Au, 'All About My Avatar: Tasrill Sieyes'.

In Second Life, mythological creatures and cyborg-like creations, sex symbols and consumption models come to compose a strange, almost surreal environment of interaction. Similarly to the carnivalesque, the construction of the avatar body opens up to all sorts of incompatible amalgamations. Although a good percentage of the avatars in Second Life stay within the field of generic and homogeneous human representations, the avatar construction entails great freedom and possibility. The monstrous and the grotesque take on different forms and respond to new challenges. Mythological figures, half-human and half-animal creatures, giants, dwarfs and pygmies may still be found, but cyborg-like forms are very popular among the non-conventional avatars. The players are free to exaggerate with body shapes and body parts and to create their 'monsters' referencing the mythological past or the apocalyptic future, or both at once. The agent behind another avatar, an over scaled robot exoskeleton named Kazuhiro Aridian (fig.5) suggests of her appearance:

it is painful, skeletal, ethereal and almost human, but things like the inverted knees and elongated hands make it not human at all. Even with all this painful metal, it retains a human face, almost as a mockery of humanity (Au, 2007b).

As in the case of Kazuhiro Aridian, size is another important parameter in this exploration: many avatars turn up greatly oversized for their environment, causing a fearful appearance, while others appear minimized and scaled down, aiming to pass unnoticed in their entourage. Just like the medieval grotesque, the avatar body is subject to programming and following the mobility and the temporality of digital culture is constantly changing and continuously developing, opposing the complete body image of the classic ideals. Thus it can be huge or minimal, fantastic or realistic, animal or human or hybrid, comical or repulsive, revealing its complex connections. And as a cloud of information within a representational environment, the avatar is always open-ended and unlimited, always connected to, and also affecting, and being affected by its digital world.

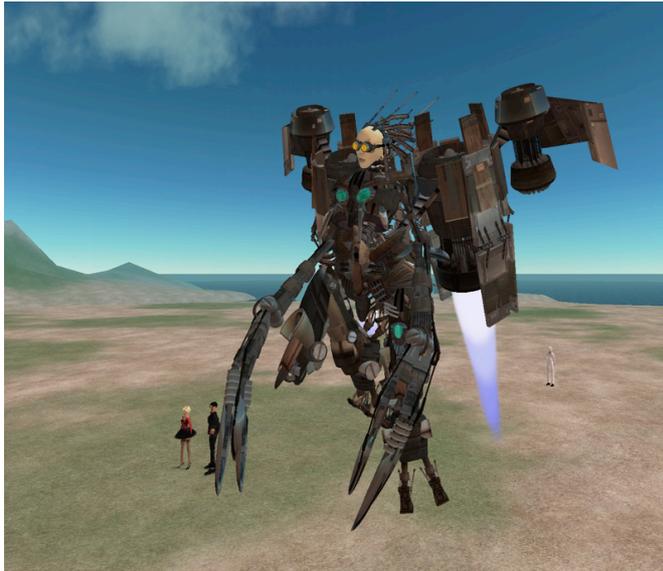


Fig.5: Kazuo Aridian, 'All About My Avatar: Kazuhiro Aridian

But apart from the play with space, Virtual Reality introduces a complicated play with time too. On the one hand avatars are temporal and transient and in keeping up with the immateriality of digitisation; on the other hand, however, they take their distance from the mortality, temporality, and finitude of human existence. In Virtual Reality and, most generally, in animation, death takes a different meaning: animated figures almost never die, and even when they do, this only takes them to the default condition of their beginning. Rather than the end, death therefore signifies the motivation for renewal, change, and improvement, and the participation of the body in this process of endless metamorphosis. This is where Bakhtin's carnivalesque sacrilege meets Aridian's 'mockery of humanity'.

Besides, similarly to Haraway's cyborgs (1991a), avatars have neither an origin story nor any sort of original unity, therefore they bear no connection to nature in the sense of an attachment to a primitive state of authenticity and originality. If they do not, too, recognise the Garden of Eden, they also do not carry with them any memories of a long-gone order – a specific 'happy place' – that would function as a model for their re-establishment. Their 'digital' nature will become an antidote to the apocalyptic imaginary of returning to dust (as they were never made of mud).

### **The Place of the Body in the Digital Age**

The depiction of the body has never been simply a composition of an image, but it always carried with it a series of meanings and connections. Two or three-dimensional, in painting or in cinema or in virtual worlds, moving or static, the body has always been the place where the material world meets the conceptual world and other 'virtual' realities, where physicality meets the subject's ideas, fears, hopes and desires. Virtual Reality becomes an appropriate environment for the visualization of these relations, as both bodies and environment are user-created, three-dimensional and interactive in real time, yet immaterial and disembodied. But the 'world standing on its head' that these spaces experiment with and represent reflects back on the physical world. If our avatars do not carry the memory of their 'first place' and will never return to dust, then we shouldn't either.

In his 'Response to Kenneth Frampton' (1986) Jean-Francois Lyotard questions the space of the body within contemporary architecture (and, by extension, in the world) by asking what makes the destination of the building, of architecture, and of space. If architecture is to accommodate the human body as functional space, this, according to Lyotard presupposes that the body is considered as a mere set of functions, and as such a predetermined 'nature'. On the other hand, on a different, ontological – Heideggerian – and poetic perspective, the body is not a functional entity that needs to be enveloped, but instead a reason for space to happen and an 'instance of gathering: something gathers itself' (Lyotard, 1986: 30). The prototype for this space is then the mother's womb: 'one can say that the first model of this space is the mother's womb, as first dwelling' (Lyotard, 1986: 30). But within the contemporary context, where the human body becomes a technological object, the subject of bio-medicine and bio-engineering, can we still argue about the 'inside' and the 'outside' of this body, its boundaries and its functions? And are such features capable of explaining how the body relates to the others and its environment, and conversely, what makes its place within the world?

Lyotard sees the context of digitisation as an era when any distinction between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the intimate and the remote, is difficult to uphold, not because of the abolition of any sort of physical boundary, but because – despite such boundaries – the exchange of information becomes dominant. Inclusion and exclusion have thus to do with having or not the media to receive and send messages and communicate with others. This condition has a direct impact on the conceptualisation of dwelling and consequently the significance of the first dwelling. Lyotard reflects on the scientists' promise that in a few years time it will not be necessary for women to bear their children as the period of gestation will entirely take place in vitro and asks: where does the first dwelling lay in this case? He continues:

What is the unconscious of a child engendered in vitro? What is its relationship with the mother, and with the father? The mediatisation makes me ask the following question of Kenneth Frampton: can we still base ourselves on a phenomenology or an ontology of the body to designate one of the principal functions or destinations of architecture today? (Lyotard, 1986: 31)

In this situation the body is considered neither as a plain set of functions – as these may be controlled by bio-engineering – nor as an instance of gathering – as it exists in a more complex relation with the outside world – but as a technological object, since it begins its existence in vitro. Within the context of genetic engineering and prosthetic surgery, and in a world where fertilisation and gestation may occur within a laboratory, the place of the body and the role of the first dwelling as an important determining factor in one's place in the world are in question. The body, transformed by technoscience in order to meet the needs of a world that is about communication and the exchange of information, ceases to be a 'site of resistance' to anything that that happens around it, and becomes an active component of this flexible and dynamic environment (Lyotard, 1986: 31). It seems that the more this body connects to this telecommunicational environment, the more it disengages from its roots in the physical world.

Is the memory of the first dwelling, the significance of the native ground and the bond to the mother then constants for its determination or do they need to be re-evaluated in this context? Can there be a 'first place' for the body? What is its status? When it is regarded as a technological object? In this essay we have seen monsters as processes rather than as static entities and as media to re-present and decode an ever-changing world. They are built by deconstructing others, by decomposing established beliefs and ideas, and by fragmenting selves into multiplicities; by extension, they destabilise the conventional understanding of place. Rosi Braidotti argues that 'the monstrous body, more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self' (1999: 300). Avatars, as the monsters of the digital age, disembodied and embodying at the same time, become media to discard obsolete ideas, to deconstruct and reconstruct worlds, and reposition selves within them. They liberate us from the categorisations of gender, race, age, class or sexuality that are conventionally associated with specific social and cultural roles so that the body and its environment, the home and the workplace, the private and the public, the real and the virtual, can all be seen anew. If, as argued by Lyotard, the distinction between the inside and the outside is no longer clear (from the scale of the human body to the scale of our cities and beyond) then physical as well as conceptual boundaries need to be re-evaluated as well.

## Notes

[1] 'they remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed' (Bakhtin, 1984: 25).

[2] Developed and launched in 2003 by Linden Lab, Second Life is an open, privately owned online digital world, where everybody is invited to build an avatar – a digital representative – through which they can participate in it.

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## **Biography**

Dr Aikaterini Antonopoulou teaches architectural design at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture and is a design associate at metis (Mark Dorrian + Adrian Hawker). Her doctoral dissertation (Newcastle University, 2013) and her research to date examine the consequences of the digital and the complex informational enhancement of things that the computer age has produced. She holds a Diploma in Architecture from the School of Architecture of the National Technical University of Athens (2006), and an MSc in Advanced Architectural Design from the University of Edinburgh (2008).