

Shusha Niederberger: Unreal Overall, 2004

by Domenico Quaranta

As is well known, the profile of the typical videogame player has certainly changed over the last decade. Gone are the days when such games were the preserve of the spotty and gawky male adolescent. Growing numbers of girls are playing videogames, above all games such as *The Sims Online* and *Second Life*, which involve online access to virtual worlds. Nevertheless, game design does remain a predominantly male preserve; storylines are still dominated by the male *forma mentis*, with few concessions to the female psyche. Hence an investigation of the theme of the body and the related identity of „online shooters“ inevitably involves questions relating to female identity and sexuality.

An apparently simple project with a certain communicative immediacy, *Unreal Overall* does in fact raise a number of complex questions; and that relating to visions of the female body is one of the most important. Designed and made by Swiss artist Shusha Niederberger, this polygon „overall“ in transparent plastic is modeled on shooter avatars, such as one sees in *Unreal Tournament*. The terms used here are significant. Niederberger in fact refers to this creation as an „overall“, not as a mask or costume; there is nothing carnival-like in this adoption of an identity. Nor is this a case – as in cosplay – of „putting on“ a character. Instead there is a reflection upon transformations of the body and the cultural role of clothing. The adjective „unreal“ may be a clear reference to *Unreal Tournament*, but it also highlights the contrapositions between the real and unreal which is central to the project.

Unreal Overall has been employed in importantly different ways as the project proceeds. On various occasions, the artist has presented it as an installation, alongside a graphic skeleton of the avatar and a photograph which shows the overall being worn as if it were a fashion garment. Another possible layout consisted of a series of poses inspired by the main actions that the avatar performs within the game, from running to shooting. Finally, in a recent video entitled *Unwrapping*, the artist appears at first entirely nude with the overall gradually clothing her; as the animation proceeds the garment takes on different appearances that seem to be inspired by „classic“ models of female attire.

As Niederberger explains, *Unreal Overall* redesigns the virtual body as an external covering for the real body. The problematic raised by the entire operation is that this „covering“ is both a garment and a second skin. The western tradition of covering the body stretches back a long way, involving not only the history of clothing but also certain „intervention“ upon the body itself. Both of these operations have very profound cultural implications. On the one hand, they can arise from a desire to hide or mortify the body, to make it conform to standards inspired by sexual repression; look, for example, at the nunlike clothing that was for so long imposed upon women. On the other hand, they might be inspired by a desire to exhibit the body (contemporary fashion and plastic surgery) or differentiate it from all others (tattoos, piercings etc.). However, in the world of the first-person shooters there is no distinction between body and clothing, between internal and external. There is a single whole, the avatar, a virtual body which the player wears like a garment. The avatar communicates itself through its surface – that is, through clothing, actions, positions and movements. As the artist says: „which is regarded in the reality as part of the personality of the individual, is poured in the avatar in geometry and programming language“. At the same time, the avatar is a compound of social stereotypes and constructs, with which we inevitably engage when we identify with it. And, once again, it is women who are most penalised by these stereotypes: female avatars are modeled on male ones, with the sole addition of long hair and shapely breasts.

By overlaying the virtual and real body, Niederberger's *Unreal Overall* plays on both concepts; it investigates the role fashions play in the link between these two „bodies“. For centuries, fashion has redrawn the female body, not merely clothing it but remodeling its very structure. Body and clothing have been melded into a single unit, which answers to a changing social superstructure. Sometimes such „modeling“ can have tragic consequences – for example, anorexia or the deaths resulting from unsuccessful plastic surgery – and even when this is not the case there is still a sort of violence at work.

Unreal Overall seems to implement a tactic of resistance to this process. In fact, the artist wears her transparent avatar over her naked body. The transparency means that the difference between the two levels is highlighted rather than erased. One gets the impression that it is the body which redefines the avatar rather than the other way around. By placing the emphasis on the body, on its humanity, Niederberger underlines the distortion that is implicit in the process of identification with a virtual reality. And as with fashion, this distortion seems to imply violence upon oneself and, in the case of women, upon one's very femininity.

But *Unreal Overall* also tackles another problematic theme – that of technologies which redesign the body, of the metamorphoses which are transforming us into „post humans“. This is primarily a cultural revolution because it implies a redefinition of our relation with the body within which we have lived for thousands of years. Whilst we are getting used to the existence of pacemakers and the possibility of changing sex or having silicone injections to swell lips and breasts, the media provide us with the cultural models we need to pass through this „phase of passage“; and through videogames we become accustomed to another type of body.

In other words, *Unreal Overall* bears witness to a period in which the aesthetics of videogames are playing a role in the transition from the human to the post human. And it does so by posing a number of questions. What is happening to our body? How will our relations to our clothes be redefined? Will they remain something we wear or will they become a single whole with ourselves? Is this the right moment to posit the liberation of our bodies from the social constructs that have conditioned them for centuries? In fact, in the era of biotechnology does the distinction between what is „original“ and what is a social construct still make sense?

Source: *Gamescenes – Art in the Age of Videogames*; Matteo Bittanti, Domenico Quaranta (Ed.), Johan & Levi, Milano, 2006