Catt, 2010
Fake Cattelan
sculpture

nco Mattes:
he Art World

Eva and Fra
Camping in t

Melissa Gronlund

I. *The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious". One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.*[1]

Franco Mattes once had a debate with a friend over whether an idea originating on the internet could ever last as long as a work of art. To resolve the debate, and to prove his point that the internet is capable of ideas as long-lasting as that of contemporary art, Franco made a bet to take the first internet meme he came across,[2] refashion it as an artwork, and see if it held up. He went to 4chang.org – an image board website – and took a Photoshopped image of a cat in a birdcage with a canary atop the cage.

EPIC FAIL

As internet memes go, it wasn't even that funny: the canary/cat reversal was a little ironic; the physical comedy of the fat cat hemmed in by the little cage more so. But Mattes chose it anyway, and refigured it materially, asking a taxidermist in Italy for a cat that resembled the one in the image, which he then wedged into a small birdcage and topped with a stuffed canary.

When Franco exhibited it with his artist partner, Eva, they characteristically attributed the authorship to someone else – Maurizio Cattelan, an artist they felt could plausibly be believed to have made the work. Incidental details happily corroborated their story – the Italian taxidermist had actually worked with Cattelan before, and one of the curators at the gallery where the work was first shown, Inman Gallery, in Houston, Texas, had just finished a large Cattelan retrospective at the MCA Houston.

The art world bought it, hook, line and sinker, and Cattelan, whom they talked to later, said he didn't mind. Ironically, the sculpture was photographed and uploaded to the internet, and ultimately gained a new life through further anonymous manipulations.

This switch of authorship is a recurrent device in the Mattes' practice, suggesting an affront to the value system of the art world, in which value is conferred through an artist and an institution's imprimatur, but also an example of the rootlessness that they bring to the art object or art encounter. Whether by obscuring the name of the author, hiding information from the public or presenting false information to (often unwitting) participants in the works they create, the Mattes set up situations in which the viewer's mistaken assumptions and actions create the form of the work itself. These are often quite simply based on the fact that his or her assumptions seem so plausible, more so than the reality of the Mattes' work. Though the Mattes are known as pioneers of Net Art – that famously atomised, human-via-console breed of art-making – they are in fact masters of skills one might expect to lie elsewhere: emotional manipulation and storytelling.

II. *The traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness - irony, satire - seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled. Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an ideal, theatricality.*[3]

In 1998, they created a fake artist, Darko Maver, who they alleged was based in the former Yugoslavia. Maver was the progenitor of fashionably political protests that went perhaps beyond the bounds of good taste; his works were picked up by the wider art press and he was ultimately invited to the Venice Biennale of 1999. In *United We Stand* (2005–06) the Mattes created the marketing campaign for a movie of the same name that hit just the right notes of chauvinist patriotism and heroic gun-slinging (set against a background of a waving EU flag, the movie's tag line read: 'Europe Has a Mission'). It was advertised by billboards in Vienna, Berlin, Bologna, Barcelona, Bangalore, Brussels and (breaking the chain) New York. Reaction among the public varied from place to place – some of the European audiences thinking the film was a parody of Hollywood-style blockbusters; some of the US audiences not realising that the EU had a flag.

Colorless, Odorless and Tasteless (2011) is a hacked arcade game that emits toxic carbon monoxide the longer one plays it: a literalisation of the handwringing fear that video games lead directly to homicide, but also a trespass of one of the basic rules of societal engagement, the pact not to try and surreptitiously kill one another. The Mattes' plays with secrecy and subterfuge are well-judged, playing off of and abetted by the viewer's own prejudices, and they enlist these unaware participants to complete the stories they simply begin.

In the project *Nike Platz* (2003), for example, they put up a mobile mini-Nike headquarters announcing that Karlsplatz in Vienna had been bought and renamed Nike Platz. The "info-box" store comprised two floors, and was kitted out in the mix of clean design, technocratic Hadid-like architecture and swoosh logo that has come to signify Nike in advertising campaigns. The structure looked expensive; the amount of money one assumed it cost suggested not a Situationist prank but the veritable renaming of the public space by the footwear corporation. Nike, which eventually found out about the stunt, then sued the Mattes, giving their fictional intervention into the public sphere a purchase on reality – a real example of the litigations a company will go into in order to safeguard their reputation and an illustration of the monetary value of a brand. *Nike Platz* worked because it so easily could be

true: it is the kind of thing Nike would have done. In acting as if they were Nike, in *Nike Platz* the Mattes exaggeratedly performed the identity of the corporation – playing Nike, as Sontag would put it, in drag.

III. *Something is good not because it is achieved, but because another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human – in short, another valid sensibility – is being revealed.*[4]

Often operating outside of the gallery space, the Mattes' projects attempt to harness the information contained within the architectural or societal clues that guide one's understanding of a situation. The institutional theory of art,[5] by which the museum or gallery walls prompts a visitor to read an object with the kind of close attention befitting a work of art is one example of a situation in which the context changes the literal identity of the object. The Mattes, going further, find and exploit these conditions in the everyday spaces of human encounter, particularly that of the digital world, putting out false propositions that appear unauthored or which are hidden behind a fake name. In his famous essay 'What Is an Author?', Michel Foucault identifies the author function as a means of uniting a corpus of writings as a discrete set of literature that may be examined as one and as different from other examples of writing: 'since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property'. However, since those conditions have changed, and are 'in the process of changing', he states that 'the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but *still with a system of constraint*'.[6] Foucault leaves this system of constraint open to the imagination, writing that it 'will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced', but saying no further. However, it is not clear that this new system of constraint has since appeared, and indeed I would argue the conditions of existence now – the internet's unprecedented level of both anonymity and access to others; increasing globalization

and deterritorialisation – further inhibit this system of constraint from forming. It is thus into this space of fiction formerly ruled by the author function that the Mattes enter, and whose rootlessness they crucially exacerbate with their fake authorships.

The author is not a timeless function on the literature landscape; indeed it emerged in its modern guise in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and only slowly. Dryden, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Walter Scott – they gave their name to only some of their works, and as late as the nineteenth century Jane Austen is mostly referred to in critical literature as 'a Lady' or 'the author of *Pride and Prejudice*'.[7] Pseudonyms were also common particularly for female authors, and misinformation and lies abounded on title pages; the first edition of Pope's *Odyssey* of 1728 announced itself as a re-printing of a Dublin edition, which indeed never existed.[8] Much of this was

a means to evade censors and lawsuits in a politically repressive publishing environment, and 'secret histories' and *romans à clef* were a highly popular genre, particularly in Restoration England. (Secret histories were a kind of novel that made public libellous, sexual or elite secrets through allegorical structures; a good example would be Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters*, 1864.)[9] But if there is a long tradition of hidden authorship, these authors were working in a quite different situation to that of the Mattes and other Net artists and activists who have also made fake authorship a recurrent motif.[10] Though Pope resorted to subterfuge and misinformation, much of the publishing world at the time knew he was the author. The Mattes operate in a playing field that lacks the coordinates for such recognition. If the world is larger, global and consequently one of increasing anonymity, the Mattes exploit how people navigate this faceless world.

IV. *Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.*[11]

With Darko Maver, the art world expected a dissident political artist to arise from post-communist Yugoslavia; the Mattes took these expectations on board and, as with the cat and canary, materialised it. The works they staged of Maver's were in bad taste and almost too much: the

images ostensibly showed sculptures made by 'Maver' that were bloody, grotesque mannequins that he would leave in public places. The reality, however, was even more gruesome: the images were not documentation at all but actual photographs of corpses the Mattes found on the internet,

and which they exhibited to a public prepared for representations of violence from the former Eastern Bloc, but perhaps not for real death from, well, wherever.

Staged or depicted death (or, as in *Colorless*, the incipient death) often appears in their practice, as a limit against which all claims of fictionalisation and falsehoods run against: people do really die, and when they die, they are

really dead. This fact, and the raw emotions provoked by it, are for the Mattes a tool to test how atomised we really are. For *No Fun* (2010) Franco Mattes simulated committing suicide in a public webcam-based chat room. Thousands of people watched while he hung from the ceiling, swinging slowly, for hours. The fact that the footage was not still but showed him swaying made it both more ghastly and compelling. In such a way the Mattes exaggerated the distance and lack of real engagement people complain about in relation to the net and in social media encounters, creating a situation of the most dire loneliness and affect – an updated version of the anonymity suggested by the urban cliché of 'woman dead in Manhattan flat for two years and no one realized': 'man seen hanged on internet but no one can get to him in reality'.
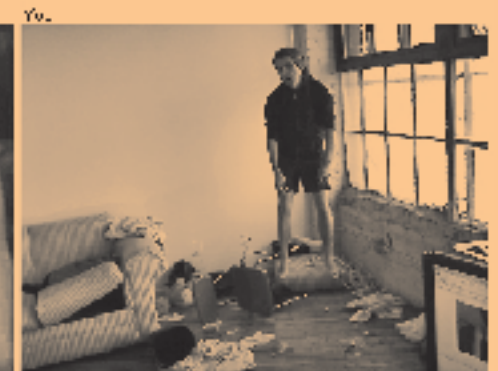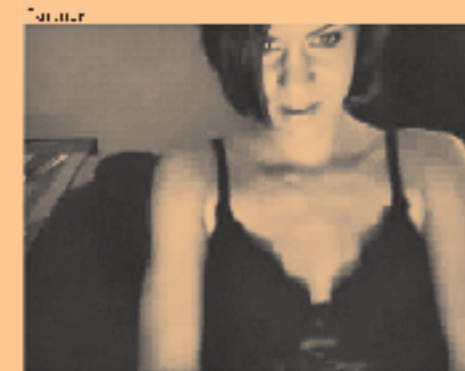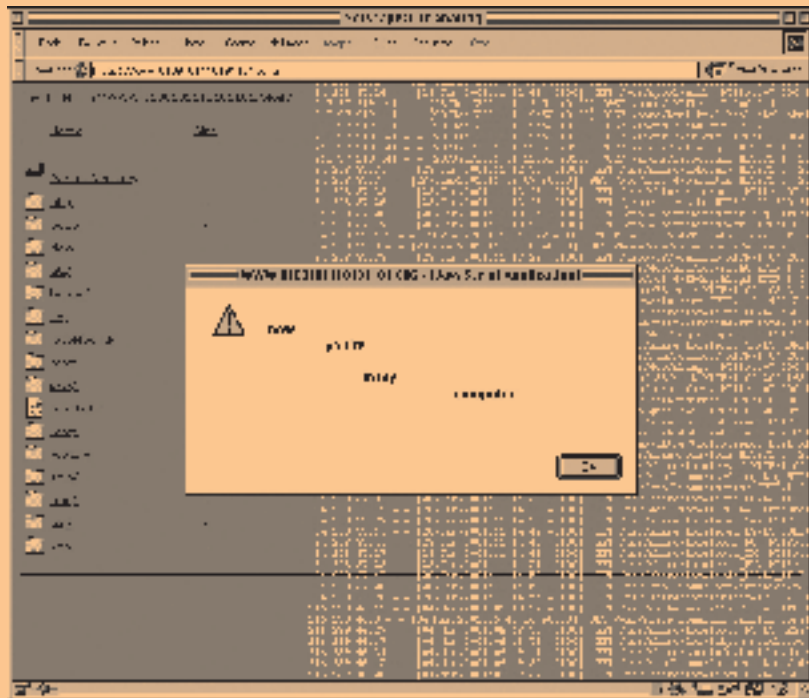
V. *Camp taste is a kind of love...*[12]

In *Life Sharing* (2000–03), one of their best known works, the Mattes made the contents of their computer public for three years, encouraging others to follow their life and to take documents from their computer at will. Everything on their computer was available to search, read and freely copy (notably, it was mainly text, as this was before digital cameras and smartphones became ubiquitous), as were their emails, which could be read by others as they arrived, and even before the Mattes saw them. Friends and acquaintances who were squeamish about this level of attention were forced to technologically regress a few decades and use the post and telephone in order to avoid scrutiny. The project is, in many ways, a highly romantic one – both for the ideal of open and free information, which was so current at the time,[13] and, signalled by its title, by being very much about love. It communicates the opening-up, outpouring and lack of secrecy that comes with the ideal total trust of a relationship, and indeed the Mattes, who are romantic as well as artistic partners, have often called it a 'self-portrait'. Opening their lives to the public also entailed an exhibitionist dimension – look at our total confidence! (in both senses of the word) – which in practice must have been offset by the sheer voyeuristic thrill of rummaging freely through another's personal effects. The grandiosity of the gesture would, I think, have been undermined by the termite interest provoked by the details; and for those who never saw it, the reverse might obtain.

The work has become famous for being an example of the internet's levelling of any distinction between public and private – a shift discussed in many different terms, from the political (people's private lives becoming matters of public concern) to the personal (people sharing their lives through social media but 'not actually living them') and even to the effects on journalism. Again, looking to the beginning of the era of mass publishing tempers this hype somewhat. European civil society has since the 1600s generally shifted its focus from matters of public significance to those of private significance, culminating, as McKeon says in his study of this shift, in the apotheosis of domesticity that marked the nineteenth-century novel. In their focus on the rites of marriage and the social world contained within the drawing room, these novels accurately reflected the fact that one's public standing was often determined within the realm of the private, and these works took over from 'secret histories' in showing 'the assumption by the private realm of tendencies toward thematic and teleological significance that formerly had characterised only the public realm'.[14] Viewed on this continuum, the internet does not so much erase the distinction between the two spheres as continue the replacement of matters of public significance with those of the private that began in the 1600s. *Life Sharing*, a very early work in Net terms, reflects this historical swing, but also over-plays it, moving it beyond the bounds of representation and into that of real life – another historical shift, towards participation and reality TV, that it anticipates.

Moreover, rather than the one-way street of publishing and passive reception that characterised the pre-internet age (it might be instructive to note that Franco Mattes once called gallery visitors 'passive voyeurs'), the mode of sharing public and private is now social; people feed back, at least outside of a gallery. The path of the misinformation the Mattes give out in their work is difficult to follow, as it abuts against a desire for transparency – the opposite of the art world in many ways – which means they will as happily communicate the truth as dig deeper into their lie. Their work, that is, cannot be examined distinctly from the social context in which it appears; they have said that with their works they seek to 'frame a moment in space and time'.

VI. *Camp makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp transcends the nausea of the replica.*[15]

As with *Life Sharing*, the Mattes often underline or confuse the social character of private information, and its often inconsistent configuration as such. One such means, as we have seen, is toying with the significance of authorial authenticity, which persists in relationship to photography at times, and other times is merrily ignored. For instance, the proliferation of images available online has, as Julian Stallabrass put it in a recent interview with the artist Trevor Paglen, who works with stealing images of secret military sites, rendered the act of photography performative: 'Tourists at any reasonably well-known spot can be sure that they will find dozens or hundreds of decent photographic records of the place online, so taking their own pictures has become a performative token act'.[16] It becomes an act of authenticity but also a ritual – an act one does as if to prove that one actually visited the site. Photography has also become more social. In the text 'Display, Identity and the Everyday: Self-Presentation Through Online Image Sharing',[17] Julia Davies writes how images posted to digital sharing sites are experienced socially: they are taken in order to be shared, and content streams are added to in a crowd-sourced, openly accumulative way. Moving away from the fetishised material photograph that is meant to be

handled and beloved in a private, interior domestic realm – a mode of understanding that would be exemplified by Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980) and his discussion of the photograph of his mother in the *Winter Garden*, a photograph too precious to even be reproduced in his book – images on photo-sharing sites are to be seen by everyone, organised for public view, and indeed often originally taken in order to take part in this public forum of expression. Furthermore, as Stallabrass's comment reminds us, the act of taking these images in order to participate is in itself potentially superfluous. People could simply source already existent images from the web in order to add these to their online profiles – though, significantly, they do not.

Two things are at work here: firstly, the public, open nature of the photographs' reception and dissemination, and secondly, the bias towards an authenticity of the works' creation – the need for the images to be privately authored before their public consumption. Barthes's *Winter Garden* image, it seems, is not wholly left behind: the use without permission of personal images is still an ethical taboo, and equally a legal one, despite images' being posted to the web without safeguards to prohibit their proliferation. The Mattes' most recent work, *The Others* (2011), seeks to contravene this taboo and tease out the

inconsistencies of its position. If everything is open to be copied, then copying it shouldn't be a crime. The video work comprises a digital slideshow of 10,000 photos the Mattes have taken by hacking into others' personal computers: a rolling slideshow of private images of different people performing their own selves . It is, in many ways, a condensed, pictorial version of the navigation of the private/public sphere that unfolded in the nineteenth-century novel. However the meat of the work is not just the representation of these images but the act of stealing them, and significantly, the bringing of these images of others into the public realm of the gallery context is not only a trespass from public to private but a breach of authorial ownership.

VII. *One is drawn to Camp when one realized that "sincerity" is not enough.*[18]

The Others has resemblances with another act of theft they accomplished – a theft in material terms, not just digital, which was in fact their first work together. For *Stolen Pieces* (1995–97), they pilfered ancillary bits and pieces from artworks by major artists – Marcel Duchamp, Nam June Paik, Jeff Koons, Tom Wesselman, Joseph Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol – and the list of pieces they pocketed can go on. Once taken out of the museum space, with its value-bestowing aura, the integral constituents of great artworks descend into being mere bits and pieces.

How to keep that deterritorialised status while also becoming a work 'by Eva and Franco Mattes' in an art space is one of the difficulties of this type of practice, and one that they grapple with in putting together exhibitions for gallery or institutional venues. They have specified, for example, how important it is to them that their work exists outside of the gallery space, and indeed all their works are usually available before a show's opening on their website. In organising shows a key question has been how to handle the transition of their works from the more undetermined space of public encounter to the determined space of the gallery, where actions that might be shocking are bracketed off as gestures or exist as with quote marks around them – representations of an intention to poison someone, rather than the real attempt (even though, of course, the carbon monoxide emissions are real enough). The ruptures and reactions that the Mattes seek to provoke are ones that need their social dimension – accomplished within the complex, dialogically constructed spheres of consensus-forming in which one establishes the basic facts of a situation: is Nike taking over the space or isn't it? Is the man hanging in danger or isn't he? And so on. It also probably helps that 'Eva and Franco Mattes' are long-time pseudonyms under which they have operated their art practice – a fact I came to rather late. 'What do you think?', they said when I asked them whether they were indeed their real names. 'Of course not.' But just as I assumed that they were going to keep up their charade, and then they went on to tell me the full story of how they acquired them – the jolt of authenticity in a practice of half (and full and non-) truths.

1   Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Picador, 1966, p.288. Note 41.
2   An internet meme is perhaps best described as a collaged image that acquires specific meaning as it spreads online.
3   S. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', op. cit., p.288. Note 43
4   S. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', op. cit., p.287. Note 36.
5   See, for example, James Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.
6   Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?' (1969, trans. Josué V. Harari), in *The Foucault Reader* (ed. Paul Rabinow), New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, p.119. Emphases mine.
7   See Pat Rogers, 'Nameless Names: Pope, Curll, and the Uses of Anonymity', *New Literary History*, vol. 33, no. 2, Spring 2002, pp.233–45.
8   *Ibid.*, p.237.
9   See Michael McKeon, *The Secret Life of Domesticity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.
10 See, for instance, John Cunningham, 'Clandestiny and Appearance', *Mute*, 8 July 2010: http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/clandestinity-and-appearance
11 S. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *op. cit.*, p.275.
12 S. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *op. cit.*, p.291. Note 56.
13 The Mattes and their website, 0100101110101101.ORG, were one of the first in the field of Net Art. Emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a group of (literally) networked individuals, Net Artists were interested in politics and the forms of sociality the internet promised, and the transformative capabilities of art on the web; they and others copied material, stole material, created ephemeral visions online and connected people in real time. Net art's exclusion from the commercial art world meant that digital artists encountered participatory art and relational aesthetics, which also reached their peak at the same time, somewhat differently: they operated outside of the gallery space anyway, making their marshalling of the subjectivities of others less provocative and more pointed – not an end in itself, but a means to a political and ideological statement, such as the freedom of information in the Copyleft movement or the grass-roots anti-globalisation movements that organised over the web and also looked to Negri and Hardt's *Empire*, as Net artists did, as the key text of their time. Net artists saw the world as one of deterritorialisation: the unmooring of a place from its markers, and capital as the deterritorialising agent par excellence. Their *NikePlatz* project is a classic example of illustrating this deterritorialising impulse, showing how large-scale corporations with political clout and gargantuan ambitions for market share might and do usurp publicly owned spaces.
14 M. McKeon, *The Secret Life of Domesticity*, *op. cit.*, p.xxiii.
15 S. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *op. cit.*, p.289. Note 46.
16 Julian Stallabrass, 'Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglan', *October*, vol.138, Fall 2011, p.3.
17 Julia Davies, 'Display, Identity and the Everyday: Self-Presentation Through Online Image Sharing, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol.28, no.4, December 2007, pp.549–564.
18 S. Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *op. cit.*, p.288. Note 41.

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