THE AVATAR
An Interview with
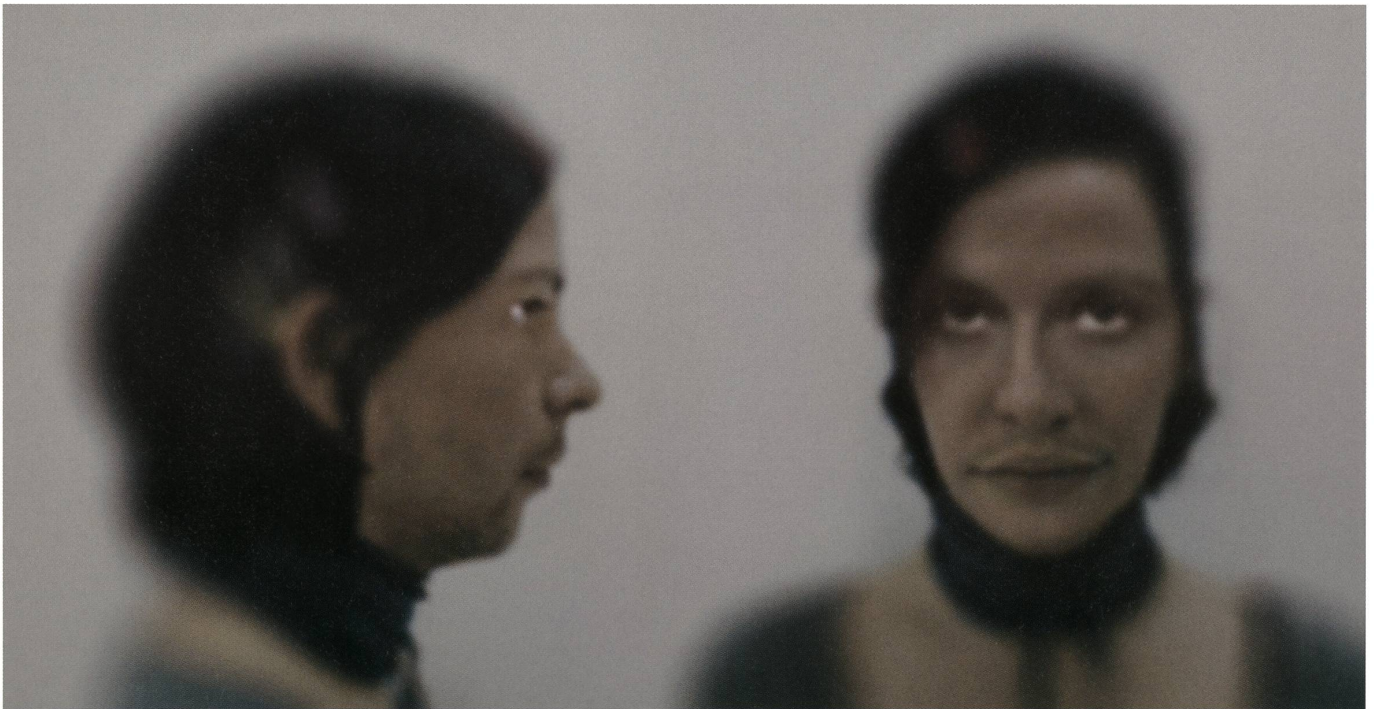# François Roche
by Klaus Platzgummer

fig. a. The Ex-Avatar of New-Territories, Version from November 2015. Montage: François Roche and Camille Lacandée, new-territories.com, Bangkok, 2016.

François Roche proposed to meet at the Yesterday Tearoom in Chakkrawat, a district in Bangkok's city center. It is 8:45 am, September 17th, 2015. I am still the only guest.
Close by, the French architect runs the architecture office ‹new-territories. com› together with his partner Camille Lacandée. Since the foundation in 1993 with Stéphanie Lavaux and Gilles Desevedavy, the studio has changed the name several times. In lectures and interviews, Roche avoids the presentation of his face. In lieu of his face he represents himself with the avatar. We agreed on 9 o'clock, he is already twenty minutes late. Seriously, will he leave me in the lurch? No, he is coming down the road, enters the tearoom, sits down and orders a Cappuccino.

François Roche immediately began speaking—without introductory prompt.

François Roche (fr): The avatar was created to draw attention away from the portrait of the architect, and towards his work. At this time other architects were celebrating the portrait. It was at the beginning of the rise of mass-culture consumption. Culture was becoming a business-model. We were beginning in the 1990s and were swimming in Postmodernism— as if it had become physical fact. Control was no longer a kind of research of emancipation, a research of the Avant Garde, a research of the risk or a research of a provocation, but the return of something already gone. It was the starting point of ‹the echo›. Culture was an echo. It first started with the Yves Saint Laurent

t-shirts that paid homage to Mondrian. The echo began in the 1960s as a maxim and the beginning of a ‹mass-fication› of exchange. The financial world changed, following the 1990s.

The echo was a deal between creators—no, actually it was more of a deal between creatives, rather than creators, which makes a difference. It was through this ‹deal›, that Postmodernism was personified and given an identity. Our project erased this identity and put the context of the image back into question. We wanted to create a context where we could project something without identity—that wasn't associated to the notion of culture as an exchange, but instead something that was hidden under the carpet. We were forwarding the idea of culture as being something toxic, as something that is not demonstrated in public space as something of value. Culture was to be presented not as an object, but as a subject. We spoke about this in the studio. We were very suspicious of architects who had the appearance of a rock-star-type subject. The French were always pretty like that and we were afraid to be like the rock stars.

This was all before September 11th. The world was extremely open—it was the time between the Berlin Wall being taken down and the signing of the Patriot Act in the United States. It was with the Patriot Act that investigation was normalized and national security appeared. In the previous decade, everything was floating: there was no enemy, no culprit, ‹misery was not me›, ‹injustice was not me›. There was no

enemy to go directly against. It was like before, before either Communists or before Muslims were made out to be extremists. Without an enemy, the world cannot define itself. Not to justify [Otto von] Bismarck's actions, but by declaring your enemy it is possible to unify or reunify a country— simply through some definite thing you have in common to face or to fight against. So the 1990s was an interesting period where the Western world had to define itself without fears, or by declaring or provoking her own fears, without declaring who is provoking these fears from outside.

What is apparent is that the posters of Dandyism were really interesting, like the posters of Dadism were starting to take this attitude, this attitude as form, as the shape. This felt like Harald Szeemann's exhibition ‹When Attitudes Become Form› in 1969. It was interesting to reinstitute the attitude after the 1970s. The 1970s produced the shape of the attitude after the objectification of the attitude in the 1960s. It was interesting to come back and to say «Wow! We are onto something, with the personification of the artist, the personification of the point from which creation is possible».

Klaus Platzgummer (kp): Was this a starting point for your own mode of production?

fr: The avatar was a project that would stop us from being stupid. It was a work to declare that we were without something and from there to start a delegation of power, which we could transmit like a ‹systemism›. We wanted

to do something through somebody else. We were thinking about what the avatar will accept, what it will afford and what it could be used for.

Three years ago, I tried to stage the suicide of the avatar at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York. Of course with the French mediatry. Something that made a suicide was Sylvia Lavin, Greg Lynn's wife. It is not sexist – she is one of the best critics in the U.S. Even though Jeffrey is now sleeping. Jeffery Kipnis is still sparkling with intelligence. The suicide of the avatar was meant as a kind of symmetry, like a parade of death, as a test that proves that the avatar no longer recognizes itself in the world. It was interesting, because we missed the point and I continued to be staged by the avatar. It was a struggle for me to detach from myself and be the puppet. I am always thinking about the continuity of the work as it grows. There is discontinuity and continuity in the imitative meaning and the imitative speech of the avatar. The avatar is like a surface, it is not true. I am not like Jeanne d'Arc, hearing voices, but the ‹systemism› forces us to be more radical and to express distances with the system of production. This is called ‹professionalism›. To declare these distances was suspicious. Through this suspicion, we are forced to develop a type of work that corresponds to this attitude. It was a good time for this degree of ambition – it was not just an ego trip. With the avatar as ego, we could not declare our own egos through this representation of ourselves. Through this delegation of power, we lose power. But on the other

hand, we gain a certain degree of risk, of temptation, of the unknown; it becomes a temptation to walk into the unknown.

kp: Did the avatar undergo any transformations during this time?

fr: He was a transgender and also the prince of the evolution of the studio. He allowed us to circumvent the people who wanted portraits of us. The avatar transformed slightly: new mouth, new eyes, new nose, new ears – but only slightly. It transformed only enough to stay relevant. The avatar was not just a representation of Stéphanie Lavaux and me, my principal partner. The avatar was kind of a photograph of a multitude of people.

So the avatar was a kind of crealism. It is like an archipelago in the Caribbean, which was previously unoccupied. The islands came to be occupied by stream of the wind, which brought a lot of people from Brazil by the current of the sea. This created a multi-cultural society, a society that is multi-racial and has a multi-identity. It is a society where Africans, Asians, Caucasians etc. are mixed together and are not living in separate communities. A beautiful French author, Édouard Glissant has been writing about this phenomenon. Crealism is not communitarism, in fact it is the opposite. We were thinking about communitarism and the idea that someone could have neighbours of another origin and of another race. The work on the archipelago is a kind of transgendering but without any surgery. It is a transgendering solely through politics and human attitude.

Communitarism can be extremely strong, extremely violent. This discontinuity declared the avatar's identity, his specificity, like in gender theory. In the 1990s the gender theories hadn't reappeared – it was more about the illusion of universalism. The illusion of universalism, I have to admit, was naive. Because we were white, we were well-off, we were in Paris, we were around Chinatown...We invented the universalism, because we had silver spoons our mouths.

kp: Was the avatar somehow a mediation of race? Like through its grey skin for example?

fr: The grey was the result of a mixture of several different colours. Perhaps the skin becomes grey when a lot of colours are mixed together... but that was not very important. We weren't that worried about the quality of the pictures. They were quite low-definition. For the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010, we made the avatar speak with an automated voice – but it was ridiculous. The avatar does not talk or think and doesn't need to be the representation of the game.

There were a lot of artistic interpretations of avatars, for example, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's Annlee. Annlee walks and talks. We are tightly associated, almost working like partners on many projects and displaying similar attitudes. Annlee was the idea for an avatar from Korea. The avatar was based on a book, actually it was based more off the movie-adaptation of the book. Though the movie production is entirely Japanese, the

production of the character is Korean. The Japanese bought the avatar—the cheapest one. The cheapest avatars always come from Korea.

kp: What does it mean to buy an avatar? Is the avatar an object?

fr: No, it is not an object, it is a persona, a character. There is this whole industry producing characters with unique faces and emotions. The more emotive the avatar is, the more it is and the longer it will last. People pay a lot for the development of artificial emotions. The less an avatar is able to emote, the more likely it will be used on the first page or be killed off or simply disappear. Business interests are present everywhere in the development of comic books. Huyghe and Parreno made a very cheap avatar that had longevity. The avatar Annlee questions why someone would try to keep him alive. The avatar could, in fact, not afford the prolonged survival, but was supposed to die very quickly. It is kind of an ‹anthromorphism›, ‹anthropothinking› or ‹anthropocentric›—where human sensations and feelings are projected onto something, which is not meant to bear this kind of sophistication. I find it very interesting to follow a strategy of cognition, transmission, mood and feeling in order to keep romanticism alive in the work. The 1990s were not a romantic period, but they were full of optimism. There was something missing in the 1990s: failure. In the Western world everything had a naive optimism of rituals and it was interesting how the avatar kept the Pandora's Box of romanticism closed. The avatar kept

hidden the fact that we lost some aspect of ourselves. The avatar was only supposed to be a support and by carrying the character, in fact, it became sophisticated.

kp: What is the role of the body? Is the body something valuable, or is it only a kind of biological mechanism?

fr: Different from Huyghe and Parreno's Annlee, our avatar never had a full body. We just erased it, because we didn't use it. I think that the personification of the avatar, its identity is more psychotic. He is a psychopath, which was from the beginning a strategy as the psychotic does not represent. The literal interpretation is, naturally, ‹to represent as,› in order ‹to hide ourselves›. It is in fact a strategy of dissimulation. All these consequences are products of the visible world, which is more about how the psycho is made visible: to carry and drive, simultaneously. It is to carry a part we lose and to try the part we keep, so it is sort of meiotic or hermeneutic. A lot of meaning lies in in the transmission of the thinking of the bio-language itself.

There is sophistication to mishearing. «What are you talking about...?» The misunderstanding was part of the play. We were not talking about the avatar as a routinized part of daily life, but it was part of the discussion in our cavern, which was dissimulated by the avatar. It was more than just making it talk in order to compare the avatar's identity with its method of production and to create this mechanism of correspondence, this mechanism of the psycho. So in terms of the representa-

tion of the body, it is more of an artifact of which the body is not a main part.

kp: Can you elaborate on the relationship between architectural praxis and the avatar? Is the avatar itself an architectural project?

fr: We were like Rose Sélavy, doing a sort of ‹de-doubling›. I don't want to reference Duchamp too much—we are just architects. This kind of ‹duplicity› or ‹de-doubling› is interesting. It has been a sort of dialogism, ‹Me as the others›. We are in this de-doubling all the time, in a permanent state of schizophrenia. The avatar is an expression of schizophrenia. It is more than the result of schizophrenia; it is a tooling up of schizophrenia. It was not so that we could take the avatar as an input, but so that we could start something. We used schizophrenia, doubling and this kind of duplicity as a strategy for chatting, to start a dialogue and exchange.

We had to admit that we were meant to grow and to use the avatar for negotiations with clients. We wanted not only to cause a dissimulation in public space, but also find another organization of our work. We wanted the avatar to allow for exchange and to ‹contractualize› the character of the avatar. But something changed in the year 2000. The avatar became a coquette. It was not because of us, but because of social media: the selfie, which is an over-representation of the citizen by the citizens themselves. This tendency pushed avatar into the margins of superficiality, of coquetry. In the begin-

ning, the avatar was not a Dandy. It was much more of an operative mode used to open some doors, for ourselves included, from outside to inside.

The attempt to commit suicide because we became lonely. We became lonely, like Daft Punk's helmet. We love their music as something that is anachronistic, as something that is the profiteur. We kept the absurdity of this situation because we couldn't find a way to commit suicide. Now we have become attached to this avatar and are beginning to transform it a bit. I am currently working with Camille and we changed him a bit. I try to divorce, in fact.

We created a situation of systems to detach ourselves from systemism. We need to shrink, to psychoanalyze. We should do a psychoanalysis of the avatar and me, in order to find a way to detach. Detach ourselves, because we are in focus on someone else's crosshairs.

Maybe we are Siamese twins? I don't know if we have two brains or two dicks? Is the avatar feminine or masculine? Neither. It was this kind of transgender crealism, and so no identification of sex or multiple identifications of human origins would suffice. Now we are living here in Thailand – in a zone where sexism exists. We are fixing the situation.

"The last laugh…"

Chicago Architecture Biennial / Ohio, November 2015

I am neither a wax doll enslaved in a ventriloquist show, nor a kind of toy for post-pubescent children, nor a Voodoo effigy pinned on his door to exorcise demons, nor a photoshoped golem, nor a failed creature of Mary Shelleys twisted imagination... I know, what I am not and that list is long. I am even less the interpretation you make of me: „I am New-Territories, architect, a French both native and immigrant." No, my genetic map is Caucasian, Negroid, Asian, and my nature is "both": a transgender, born like Hermaphrodite, I have both sexes and multiple sexualities. I had to go through numerous plateaus of human stupidity, or the only existing BGTG in cabarets, playing the clown at "chez Michou" (sometimes with talent).

But, in these days, I must admit, I am tired of being with New Territories for so long. I sent them my decision, irrevocable and definitive, to leave my position, so they no longer use me as their stooge, as their scapegoat, for hide and seek-sex, like an undercover agent... Making me, muddle trough their small problems of the architects... I do not agree anymore with their work, with which they subjected me... it must be possible to escape! I can no longer suffer from the manners and views, they appropriated.

In tune with the postmodern charade "Helsinki Guggenheim", orchestrated by Mark Wigley, the "Chicago Architecture Biennial" acted as a trigger: assisting the Carnival of Activism, wears Prada, the 'left', and obviously, agitprops in charge to save the planet, misery and Willy... but in the end, however, beforehand, all those that did not correspond to them became a "persona non grata"... which were the occupants, part of the daily routine at the social-center down-town or rather in front of the Biennial / get the bastards out, these filthy, fat and ugly bodies, with their filthy rubbish-filled shopping carts, all this should disappear... cleaned up... to be among us... permission was granted after passing the super-private-club-silver-class-premium security check... among us, we were allowed daub ourselves with the silly words of outrageous stupidity, from our ingenious flag-bearer Joseph Grima... the human bullshit distillery... and assisting the clownery, stupefying to the fullest at their facebookish, selfish (shee) representation, white, in accordance with the previously agreed 'reac' discourse, pseudo-ecolo trade fair, stroking the mayor's testicles without worrying that he closed all psychiatric hospitals in the city... among other weapons... the moralizing sperm jet of good conscience of lobotomized grandmothers... paired with the pathological talkativeness and verbiage of those... those who claim to act on the world's misery, but without coming to terms with it... without ever looking into its eyes... so much they are afraid of... in the depths of "simulacred" museums, which act as a principle of exclusion, if not to say treason... (I would have liked to live as the avatar of Bourdieu, but he did not want), in a room where "the good taste of the dominant social class" is played and dramatized... her glamour... sexy, with Store Front and Fake Frida Kahlo (FFK), the peroxide-blonde master of ceremony... all fairly harmless.

Yes, precisely the same... I decided to leave François Roche and all those mother's boys... let them go under in their self-adulation, in the middle of their cultural soundproof Bunker, "champonyzed", and what now is an orphan.

Fate is sealed. My suicide belongs to me... guilty... to reach the void of the dark zone... in the states of souls...

The Ex-Avatar of New-Territories

fig. b. Correspondence between The Ex-Avatar of New-Territories and FRoche/NT, Chicago and Bangkok, November, 2015. Letter: François Roche and Camille Lacandée, new-territories.com, Bangkok, 2016.

BKK Nov. 2015

w-Territories

gree with the content, vocabulary, and syntax of our new-territories
ie position of authority, which we assigned to H(IM)ER a long time
(HE) has developed a kind of bitterness which cannot be compared
ories members.
ystemic, exquisite corpse, which can no longer be controlled...
ty and political post-Marxism... which created confusion and
ad-hominem insults, we fully deny... several times, we tried to kick
:hout success... and by the time, became hostage of this mentally ill
This strange "self-shemale-erasing"-epilogue is fully
we face our orphan weakness...

Shortly after the interview in Bangkok, the Architecture Biennial 2015 took place in Chicago. This newly established exhibition also featured the work by ‹new-territories.com›. Quite unexpectedly, this event was to mark a crucial turning point in François Roche's career. In an email from October 13th, 2015, 11:20 am, François Roche communicated that the Avatar had decided to quit Chicago and officially part with Roche's architectural practice after 25 years. On November 20th, 2015, this was followed by an announcement on the Facebook page ‹New-Territories Bkk›, together with an audio comment on the Chicago Architecture Biennal: «How not to be scared by his own voices and faces having a rant !...without N.T. avatar...!!!!!» The avatar now had an independent existence and François Roche and Camille Lacandée have ceased to represent themselves in public through the avatar.
In the context of the exhibition ‹Der Architekt im Portrait› at the Werner Oechslin Library Foundation, the correspondence between the Ex-Avatar of ‹New-Territories› and François Roche is presented among other documentations. The exhibition offers a trans-historical view on the self-representation of architects and is open until March 10th, 2016.

François Roche, born 1961, is a French architect and theoretician. Roche studied architecture at École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Versailles. He is the founder of several progressive architectural studios, including R&Sie(n) (1993), eIf/b∆t/c (2011) in Bangkok, New York and Paris. The projects by R&Sie(n) were exhibited at prominent institutions, like the Columbia University in New York, the UCLA in Los Angeles, the Institute of Contemporary Art, The Barbican, the Tate Modern in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Beside his work as an architect, Roche thaught at different universities, amongst them Columbia University, the Bartlett School of Architecture, and the ‹Angewandte› in Vienna.

Klaus Platzgummer, born 1988, studied architecture and history of art at ETH Zurich and the University of Basel. Currently, he is a postgraduate student at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. He co-curated the exhibition ‹Der Architekt im Portrait› at the Werner Oechslin Library Foundation, worked for the Swiss Pavilion of ‹La Biennale› in Venice and as an agent at gta exhibitions.