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Are You Still There?
Thoughts On a Dematerializing Self

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Introduction

Who hasn't already experienced an identity crisis, maybe trying to write your instagram bio or spending a day putting on your best smile at your barista job, where you swore you would only work for a couple of months but it's already been a year? You start to feel disconnected from the image you are trying to build of yourself and see it more and more as a character built as a coping mechanism to face society's expectations. This projected self and how you feel inside don't always get along, but you keep curating its image to keep the illusion going.

Indeed, the self is a complex concept that can be interpreted in many different ways. For me, it is a concept that encompasses many aspects : what we want or do not want ourselves to be, what we were and what we will become, as well as what we display ourselves as. Paul Thagard writes « You are a system of social, psychological, neural, and molecular mechanisms. »¹. If we put aside the biological elements that are neural and molecular mechanisms, we are left with social and psychological aspects. So, what are the social elements

¹ Paul Thagard, « What Is The Self? ». (psychologytoday.co/, 23 June, 2014) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hot-thought/201406/what-is-the-self> (accessed March, 2023)

that we use to define ourselves ? Typically, they stem from your social group, your family, your class, where you live etc, but these places we used to find value in, fade away in the age of individualism. We each live in our own bubble, of curated entertainment (such as movies, music, art) but also and transversally social media and advertising and find anchoring points and context, comparison points that are outside of our physical reality, coming from a dematerialized world.

Transversally, we are displacing our sense of morals and our attention from traditional values such as religion or family, and more and more, our attention span has become associated with a monetary value. It is sought by corporations and politicians in order to promote certain products, values or ideas. By giving it away for free, we are subconsciously allowing these external elements to make decisions for us, to dictate our opinion and consequently our emotions. These become far away concepts that are becoming harder to grasp onto and control, as their contexts dematerialize with the world. But what is a Dematerializing World? It is a phenomenon that has been happening since the development of the first computers in the 40s, which was followed by an exponential rise of technology, and then in turn of social media, reaching its peak with the pandemic. It has affected our whole way of interacting with the physical world. From the millions

of people downloading TikTok to zoom conferences or online medical consultations, digital marketing or online exhibitions, there is barely anything that cannot be achieved online. You can work, you can be entertained, you can follow yoga courses or shop groceries, you can fall in love or make enemies. All simultaneously on different tabs, software, or devices, all while being targeted by countless companies for your data. How does it affect our experience of such actions? How do we differentiate action from attention? How do we emotionally respond to such interactions ? And most importantly, how do we build a sense of self in this capitalist fast paced digital sphere? These are some of the questions that may or may not be answered in this thesis.

Attention vs Distraction

I am writing on my group project's document in Google Doc when I get a TikTok notification that my friend sent me this video of Ariana Grande hitting a remarkable D5 note leading me into an infinite scroll of videos filling any empty second with content, interrupted by a couple of ads that don't even feel like ads. Back when I was still watching TV, it was the most annoying thing to a program stop in the middle of its climax for a seven minute ad break; but at least it was obvious. I usually would change the channel and come back a few moments later with the understanding that this was a framed break and I can go back to regular programming. Now it's extra hard for the brain because these breaks last for a few seconds and it doesn't even have the time to process these changes. There's no screen in between the content like the TV channels do with their logo and a little 'advertising break' announcement. So you are fully focused on eating up this random content you've been given by the algorithm, and these targeted ads fit perfectly in the subconscious flow of thoughts without you even realizing it. This completely shifts the value we place in our attention. You can't just shut off distractions as they became part of the tools we use to experience the world.

To try and define what attention is, I looked at *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines it as « the notice taken of someone or something; the regarding of someone or something as interesting or important. », or « the action of dealing with or taking special care of someone or something. »². So it is intimately linked to our conscious and is a result of natural expansion of the mind. It is immaterial yet has found great value in today's economy. Ally Mintzer's article in the Berkeley's Economic Review, «Paying Attention: The Attention Economy», argues that attention has become a valuable and scarce resource in the age of abundant information. It is considered with a similar value to money, and even shows similar inequalities between people with large amounts of followers, and regular users³. Attention has become capital. Companies have well understood this and for decades have been infiltrating the entertainment industry with product placements, advertisings and sponsoring. Attention has replaced money in an era of free access to entertainment, and we started giving it away thinking it was a good trade, 'I'll watch your 10 second advertisement, and can enjoy this Story-time video'. Only to realize the video

2 « Attention » *Oxford Dictionary of English*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.)

3 Ally Mintzer, « Paying Attention: The Attention Economy, » (Berkeley Economic Review, March 31, 2020.) <https://econreview.berkeley.edu/paying-attention-the-attention-economy/>. (accessed March, 2023)

is sponsored and you have to watch yet another youtuber tell you how great and how much easier life will be if you subscribe to NordVPN or Skillshare. Ironically this usually engenders an action by the user, clicking the right arrow of the keyboard, about 6 times (it forwards into the video ten seconds each time). This generalized gesture can be seen as an act of global resistance, saying I came here to be entertained not pushed into spending my money, but it still disturbs the experience and finds its way to associate emotional experience with the context of a capitalist society. There's no way to disconnect, and as much as you want to resist, the infiltration of your mind is unavoidable. This is the stage on which we live our lives.

To find freewill, we have to reclaim our attention, us users, from a platform that has all the power. And for this we need to investigate what it means to be a user.

Attention vs Action

An individual becomes a user when they interact with an interface, stemming from a computer program. Within this research, I'm going to use this term as a way to describe any person interacting with the dematerialized world. This terminology implies we are not acting, but simply using the medium that is the computer (umbrella term including phones, tablets, smart watches etc). Silvio Lorusso in his



fig. 1: *Platform Ghost*, Silvio Lorusso with Sebastian Schmieg X LOREM, Installation, with Drugo More, (2020)

essay «The User Condition» argues that an individual becoming a user is reduced to some predetermined actions⁴, framed by the interface, whether it be TikTok or Reddit, android or iOS, phone or computer, car or microwave. But when for example when using a car, the user has a clear role : driver or passenger. Online, the plurality of usages makes for the internet to be a « meta-medium », and it is unclear what our condition is.

Lorusso and Sebastian Schmiegl's *Platform Ghost* (fig 1.) is an installation depicting this difficult relationship with social platforms, having the ability to erase your existence or any ways of communicating. Through panels channeling different levels of opacity, a melancholic text accompanied by similarly sad music recalls a situation where the user had been ghosted by their platform, making their entire existence vain. The powerlessness of the viewer/user easily echoes the automation of the internet, trading action for attention. These two keywords stand in opposition and are inevitably compared in my research. A striking example for this duality is a new format of content seen on TikTok : where two videos stand side by side within the same frame:

4 Silvio Lorusso. « The User Condition: Computer Agency and Behavior » (February 12, 2021.) <https://theusercondition.computer/> (accessed March, 2023)



attention

action



attention

action

Here, on one side a video showing some sort of narrative, typically an extract from usual entertainment sources: movies, reality TV show, interviews etc, and on the other side a skill based video: nail art, cooking, metal work or fish cutting... Somehow this trick allows the video to get more views, and I can think of only two reasons why; firstly, it's the logical evolution of the speed at which we consume content, now we can watch two videos at the same time, but mosly, we are watching a mechanical

action, performed by someone with a strong set of skills, and maybe it gives sense to our purposeless scrolling action. Lorusso also compares platform and factory, user and worker. Unskilled and automated.

« The mindless act of scrolling is analogous to the repetitive operation of assembling parts of a product in a factory. Whereas the worker doesn't leave their position, the user doesn't leave the page. Both feature movement without relocation. Furthermore, in the factory, machines are organized according to an industrial know-how which makes it the only one that fully understands the functional relationships between parts. How do we call a computational system organized like such factory? We can call it a platform and define it as a system that extracts and standardizes user decisions before rendering them unintelligible and immutable. In the platform, opaque algorithms embody the logic that arranges data into lists that are then fed to the user. The platform-factory is smart and dynamic, the user-worker is made dumb and static. »

Silvio Lorusso. « The User Condition: Computer Agency and Behavior » (February 12, 2021.) <https://theusercondition.computer/> (accessed March, 2023)

Losing The Thread

We are powerless in the face of unraveling unrelated content, but how did we arrive here? Why am I watching part 47 of a chopped up B-list movie on TikTok at three in the morning? Where is this way of consuming entertainment coming from?

It could have all started with the act of shuffling; Natalie Weiner's article « All mixed up » explains that the times of CD players, shuffling between songs was introduced to the user with the possibility to put up to five CDs in one player, that would smoothly switch from album to album introducing semi-randomness. The shuffle evolved with the use of firstly, online radios (pandora platform) based on your taste, then by streaming platforms allowing us to click the 'shuffle' option⁵. By shuffling your entire music library, you eliminate a need for choice, but ultimately still get satisfaction through familiarity because each song you already know. The 'luck' of expecting a song and then magically it's the one after even if you're on random scratches an itch in your brain making you feel like the universe has heard you, but in fact, it is impossible for a computer to generate randomness.

⁵ Natalie Weiner. « The Mixed-up History of the Shuffle Button. » (The Verge, April 3, 2023.) <https://www.theverge.com/23653818/spotify-shuffle-button-music-history>. (accessed March, 2023)

This way of consuming media without choosing it and randomly associating it was the downfall of context . We don't listen to full albums in order, just one song that comes up because it was chosen by an external algorithm. This shuffling action reshaped the way we expect to consume media. On our online feeds, that means receiving information in parts, with no logical thread. Instagram stopped showing you posts in a chronological order, and started to calculate what to show you in relation to what you engage with the most. This started to feel off when we missed posts from our friends and were suggested to follow brands, but we quickly gave into it because of the satisfaction of receiving content you already know you like. So, by giving away choice, desire short. We stopped looking for what we want and let the platform feed us personalized things, giving up curiosity.

But desire and curiosity are intimate conditions of our beings. In fact, it is key to our personal growth. Although disregarded as the antithesis of productivity, and a vice by various societal standards, curiosity allows one to seek true accomplishments. Instead of choosing the safety of obedience, venturing into the unknown can lead to many discoveries and give us opportunities to keep growing. So if we give it up, we lose meaning in our own lives as we don't reach out into the world. We stop moving forward and we play the same song, on repeat, over and over,

swimming in circles⁶. We let go of our personal goals and become a streamlined version of a generalized identity, and our story merges with the decor. We become the media/medium.

Becoming the media

Douglas Gordon's *24 Hours Psycho* (fig 2.) (1993), slowed down this classic movie, so much that the entertaining quality of it completely disappeared for a dreadful, almost unwatchable video, forcing the viewer to only catch a glimpse of it, or ultimately enduring physical and mental distress being forced to sit and watch for 24 hours. My ten second attention span could never handle it. Suspense is being stretched to an absurd, keeping the viewer frustrated by withholding the plot. It's the lack of entertainment that makes the viewer aware of their inaction. John Beagles and David Beach argue that « Mass culture is retailed in the gallery on the condition that it loses its capacity to entertain (pac, dialogue, soundtrack, narrative, all have to go) »⁷. But how is this developing, in an era where entertainment is omnipresent? For *Random Acts Artist Interventions into Broadcast*, an exhibition at FACT

⁶ Mac Miller, *Circles*. (Warner Bros. Records, 2020)

⁷ John Beagles & Dave Beech, "Video purified of television (On why video art wants to be boring)" , *Variant magazine*, 2003)



fig. 2: *24 Hours Psycho*, Video, Installation, Douglas Gordon,(1993)



fig. 3: *The Future of Television*, mixed media Jeremy Bailey (2012)

(Liverpool, UK) in 2012, Jeremy Bailey's *The Future of Television* (fig 3.) imagines software merging the user and the media, becoming one entity. The user wears the screen as a face filter (this was made before Instagram filters took over social media), and uses facial expressions to change the channel. He reversed the roles and the user controls the media by showing an emotion (smile, raised eyebrows...). The face disappears and becomes a screen. The emotional self has been replaced by entertainment, as fragments of various TV programs cover most of his face. A demo of this filter exists on YouTube and is filmed on the artist's computer webcam, filmed at home⁸. I am also experimenting it on my computer, at home, and the line is blurred as to whether this is a documentation of the artwork, or the artwork itself. Bailey's hyper-stimulated energy while explaining the concept of the filter feels very performative and the rapid switch from one emotion to another perfectly fits the hyper-stimulation experienced on media platforms. It's hard not to be entertained by it.

This ambiguity feels logical, following from the dematerialization of art, that can be attributed to the performative, intermedia, and conceptual practices development of the 60-70s. It allowed for a new understanding of what medium is, and how it affects the

⁸ Jeremy Bailey, *The Future of Television* (Youtube, November 12, 2012.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCl0uf12r8>. (accessed March 2023)

subject. Looking away from painting and sculpture as traditional mediums, artists turned to unconventional practices, with a result that is often ephemeral. In 1968, Lucy Lippard pointed out in her essay, «Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972» that art was entering a phase of pure intellectualism, the result of which could be the complete disappearance of the traditional art object⁹...

Unveiling Identities

The institutionalized entertainment industry (music labels, film studios, etc) has successfully evolved online, setting up as music platforms, streaming services etc. By doing so, the industry which was previously relying on physical spaces such as cinemas and multimedia retailers, has put itself on the level of accessibility as individuals and independent artists. For the user (us) that means increased accessibility to entertainment. We consume much more content than we ever did before, multiplying the sources from which we build our « self ». Identity itself starts to shift as our sense of morals gets impacted by overlaying narratives.

As Legacy Russell puts it in «Glitch Feminism»,

⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. (Leonardo 8, no. 3, January 1, 1975)

this increased accessibility to different morals can be a tool for people who seek different representation, and social media allows for communities to build and for identity to sharpen for those who cannot find what they relate to in their social circles¹⁰. Experimentation with social profiles and acceptance within online communities can be life-saving for some and flies close to the goal of 'becoming one's true self' and being seen by others. I will cite Cindy Sherman even if her work predates internet culture, as it is a good example of what experimenting with self-representation can lead to. She already explored the role of mass media consumption in the development of self-identity by impersonating a wide range of common female social roles, or personas. In her early work of the late 70s, she guises as female character roles from mid-century B movies, such as the unhappy housewife, or the jilted lover (fig. 4). She later kept displaying the diversity of human types and stereotypes in her images, but started to accentuate the artificiality of the costumes, making it more grotesque (fig 5.). As wigs slip off, make-up is not blended, lighting and decor becoming more prop-like, she highlights the artificiality of self-construction.

Sherman has been a pioneer in the criticism of the roles mass media, celebrity and advertising have had in the construction of identity, but the new forms of

¹⁰ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. (Verso Books, 2020.)



fig. 4: *Untitled Film Still #3*, Photography, Cindy Sherman (1977)



fig. 5: *Society Portraits* series, *Untitled #474*, Photography, Cindy Sherman (2008)

consumption have only increased such mechanisms. Today, lots of queer artists and cyberfeminists work around social media, revealing heteronormative and patriarchal structures and how to deviate from them, diversifying the landscape.

Shalva Nikavashvili is a queer Georgian-born artist who explores society's role in identity through different mediums, like costumes and masks made out of unconventional materials such as meat or rocks, and frames it in a digital context. He uses his Instagram as his personal gallery which has allowed him to bypass institutions and create his own audience. In his series of performances *WEB GIRL* (fig 6.), he puts on grotesque kinky costumes and connects to the webcam chat chatrandom.com, where he meets with straight men. He delivers cam-girl like performances to his interlocutors, creating a weird, awkward, and disturbing experience. By doing so he challenges preconceived stereotypes as well as comments on what we users do with the 'freedom' of the internet.

Self As a Medium

We can say these artists are using their « self » as a medium. But first we have to attempt to define what a medium is, and how it differs from the subject . The Tate

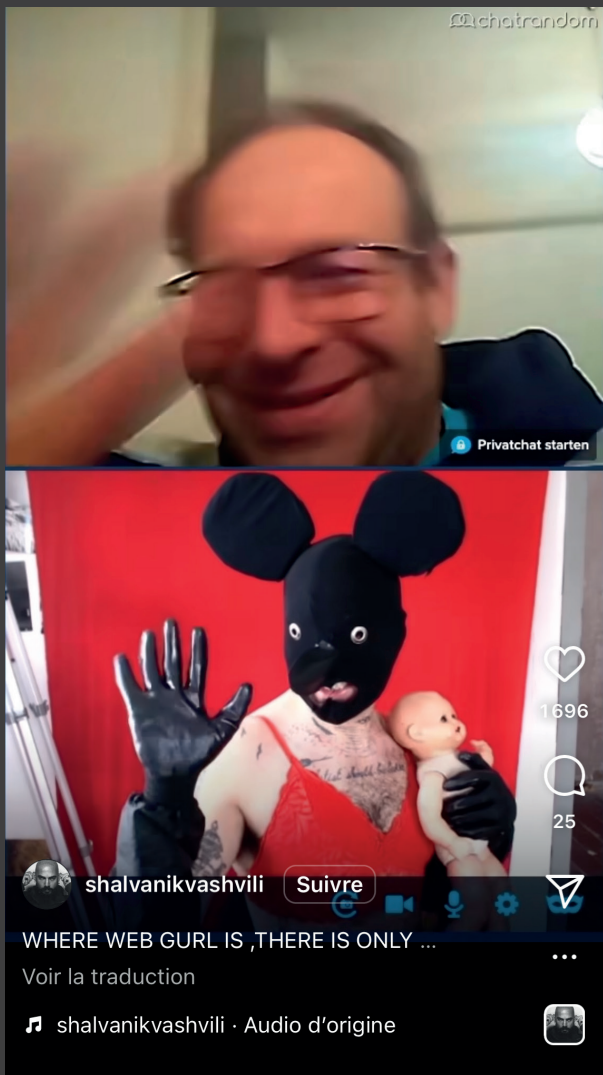


fig. 6: *WEBGIRL*, performance, Shalva Nikashvili (2023)

Museum states that « Medium can refer to both to the type of art (e.g. painting, sculpture, printmaking), as well as the materials an artwork is made from »¹¹. And, simply put, the subject is whatever is represented or depicted in an artwork. This becomes complicated when we talk about performance, as the artist is the main character and therefore the subject of depiction, but is also using their physical self as a medium. Within theatre, we can easily distinguish the body/individual being the medium of representation for a character. As Diderot puts it in *The Paradox of The Actor*, there is an understanding between the audience and the actors to ignore the fourth wall, the artificiality of the setting¹². So what about performance?

Artists such as Nora Turato blur this dissociation by presenting an extreme of herself. Her monologs are made from excerpts of advertisements, tweets, songs, daily talks, political discourse, online forums etc. Her compulsive consumption of text echoes the frenetic lifestyle of the capitalist society, which she de-contextualizes and assembles as a text that sounds like everything you have ever heard, while keeping it unidentifiable. Using the stage, the mic and the speakers

11 Tate, "Art term : Medium," <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/medium>. (accessed march 2023)

12 Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of the Actor*. (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015, originally published in 1830.)



fig. 7: *Pool 5*, performance, Nora Turato (2022)

as props to create an exaggerated reality, she distances herself from the character she embodies. Beyond content, which often becomes lost as multiple narratives intertwine, the audience focuses on its interpretation. Training with a Hollywood voice actor, the emphasis is put on tone, questioning the efficiency and the impact of these texts in a digital era where tone is lost. In *Pool 5* (fig. 7), her performance at MoMa, she is acting as her loud self who would be seen as a crazy person if such action was taken in the street. It's about using the institution as a place to re-contextualize and generate critical thought, let's call it a literary ready-made.

We identify with the extreme, as we are constantly looking for answers, meaning, and we try to figure out things at a pace that is rapidly increasing.

Disrupting The Script

As users, we are trained to become a streamlined version of ourselves, we are constantly following narratives and needs pushed by society, but are mostly just passive consumers. And as Virginie Despentes puts it in *King Kong Theory*, « a good consumer is an insecure consumer »¹³. How do we resist that ? If the only option seems to quit

¹³ Virginie Despentes. *King Kong Theory*.
Trans. Stephanie Benson (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2010.) p. 6

the platform all together, Andrea Fraser uses a different approach: acting out.

« The concept of enactment has become increasingly central to my work and thinking about art, performance, and pedagogy. While most analysts use the term to describe clinical phenomena only, enactment in the very broadest sense may encompass the psychically invested, motivated, and structured aspect of all activity. Informed by object relations and intersubjective perspectives, enactment recognizes the constant interplay between internal and external, subjective and objective, psychic and social structures. Thus the focus on psychic structures does not preclude or exclude the social but rather enables an analysis of how the social is internalized, affectively invested, and coproduced in relationships that are inseparably psychological and social. »

Andrea Fraser, « Act », *In Terms of Performance*. (The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, Philadelphia, Arts Research Center, University of California, Berkeley, 2016.) »

Her work is anchored in institutional critique, but she says it's not about being against it, as we are part of it. Art is happening between you and the work, not just the work. It's about what are we trained to see when we walk into a gallery/museum, and it's a good analogy for how we are



fig. 8: *Official Welcome (Hamburg version)*, performance, Andrea Fraser (2001)

trained to behave in society. In her performance *Official Welcome* (fig. 8) in 2003, she impersonates an art dealer, presenting an artist during the opening of their exhibition. The speech is entirely made from found texts from the art world (artist statements, curator speeches, critics ...). The speech begins rather normally, but tone and content become more and more absurd, as she uses extravagant language such as « greatest artist of all time », « simply outstanding » and exaggerates her gestures. The crowd begins to understand the unspoken contract to read this speech as critic; as she suddenly begins to play the long-awaited artist, answering her own questions, starts taking her clothes off, and her acts becomes more blatant. So much that the audience has to ask themselves, 'why is she doing this?'. The emphasis is put on the absurdity of the rigid structure of speech, which here is the interface of social expression.

Hacking The Platform

Artists have also been trying to hack the algorithm as a form of resistance: Eva and Franco Mattes' *Bots* (fig. 9) have tracked down Facebook moderators, people tasked with deciding what stays and what goes, according to 'community guidelines'. They have chosen to use the form of TikTok make-up videos, a technique used by militants



fig. 9: *Bots*, video and Installation, Eva and Franco Mattes (2020)

to bypass the censorship on the platform, like Feroza Aziz¹⁴. Visually, it's nothing more than doing make-up, so they're able to bypass censorship. In this artwork, Facebook content moderators describe their experience spying on teenagers, seeing child pornography and other unimaginable horrors, to which they start to feel numb as the mundanity of it echoes the mundanity of the TikTok format. The blending of their make-up products echoes the disappearance of their own emotions, as they repeat « blend, blend, blend ».

Through the aesthetic of regular make-up videos, Eva and Franco Mattes use the attention span of viewers to draw attention to the mechanisms of censorship. What is normally thought of as a robot blocking videos containing specific keywords, is actually a human employed by a company working for Facebook, and decides according to community guidelines who's profile has to be deleted or not.

Rebecca 2.0

Besides platforms's so-called efforts to regulate the content, audiences also have a strong power over one's social profile. Posting the right thing can give you large amounts of followers overnight, and posting the wrong

14 @ferozaaziz on TikTok



fig. 10: *Rebecca Black - Friday (Remix) ft Dorian Electra, Big Freedia & 3OH!3 [OfficialVideo]* , video, (2021)

thing can get you bullied with extreme violence. When thirteen-year-old Rebecca Black posted her infamous *Friday* music video¹⁵, it became one of the first viral videos on YouTube, and she was bullied for years. In 2021, Dorian Electra collaborated with her to make a remix of the song (fig. 10), which makes use of Electra's signature hyper-pop music videos, that embrace the hyper-stimulation of the media. Extreme beats, flashing colors, memes and latex suits meet in a flashing light-warning worthy video. Instead of resisting, they take it and push it to an extreme while breaking gender norms and provocatively play with codes and expectations. They are able to overthrow society's ruling over their identity and claim their right to experimentation.

Checking In

There is an ongoing conversation around identity checking online, whether it is by TikTok asking your date of birth (to know if you're over the age requirement for using the app according to governmental laws), tinder asking a picture to verify you're not a catfish, or proving to Instagram there's enough press about you to get a blue check. So how legal is it to play with identity online? What are the limits and

¹⁵ Rebecca Black, *Friday*, music video (Youtube, 17 September 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfVsF0SbJY0>

how does it feel like to get ID'd by a computer ?

Three screens and sound constitute Ed Atkins's work *Safe Conduct* (fig. 11). It showcases an airport's security checkpoint rendered in 3D, where identity is checked according to very specific rules, which he describes as a violent process. Here the consequences of misbehavior are dire. Blood, face, teeth, a brain, but also more grotesque things such as a roast chicken or miniature human skeletons are put in trays, as to highlight the violent process that is identity checking. I see airports as good analogies to the digital sphere. They are both designed for efficient usage by almost any type of person there is on earth, and both use design with authority, through signage and way finding. There is no time for people to step away from their paths, they must go from check in to their gate in a straightforward manner. The airport is also a non-space, a transitory location that holds no identity, just as the internet which absorbs users identity to fabricate it's own.

Looking at airports through the lens of *Glitch Feminism* made me wonder what would happen if a glitch occurred in the airport, and as I started looking around on forums what people do when they have to wait hours at their gate, and found this :

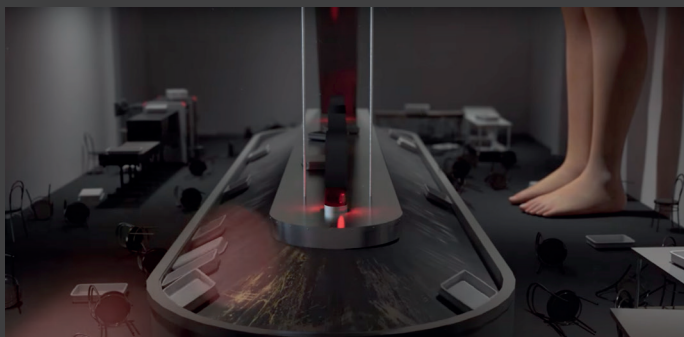
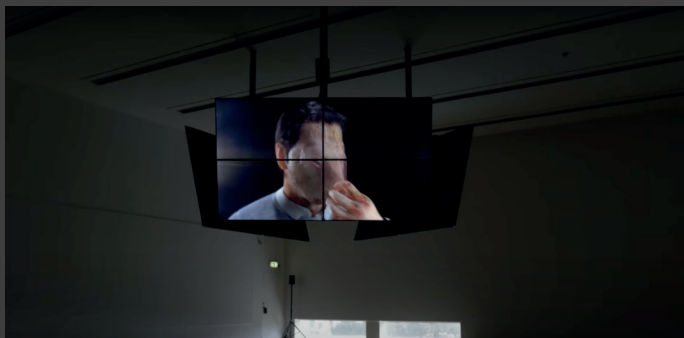


fig. 11: *Safe Conduct*, Video, Ed Atkins (2016)



Going back to identity checks. Our phones use our physical self, our bodies to check that the user is the owner of said computer. Studies show that smartphone users unlock their phones at an average of 150 times a day; through Face ID or fingerprint, your identity is constantly checked. But somehow we're not bothered by that. We happily let devices recognize our bodies and give away our data in exchange for convenience.

Self As a Ressource

Harvesting the body data, Jennifer Lyn Morone imagines a world where we've achieved the next stage of capitalism, creating her own business model of becoming what she



fig. 12: *JLM Inc.*, Mixed Media, Jennifer Lyn Monroe, (2017)

called an incorporated person (fig. 12). She promises that by collecting your data and your identity, you and only you could trade it for profit. The project is meant to determine what we are worth, by determining how much you could charge when using your own resources measured by your production costs, energy and time. She states « Using time and energy as an indicator against other measures, such as enjoyment, irritation, distraction, and other emotions felt when resources are being depleted, enables you to achieve a «better state of life efficiency »¹⁶. The role of personal data in the development of our digitalized society is undeniable, and Morone is proposing a way to reclaim ownership over it. But to me it echoes Silvio Lorusso's *Entreprecariat*, where he blends the terms of entrepreneur and precarious workers, showcasing the difficulties of being self-employed in a world ruled by motivational posters and never-ending quests for freedom¹⁷. The result is constant uncertainty, a back-and-forth between enthusiasm and anxiety-filled realism about the future.

16 Jennifer Lyn Morone, *JLM Dev*, <https://www.jenniferlynmorone.com/>, 2014 (accessed March 2023)

17 Silvio Lorusso, *Entreprecariat: Everyone Is an Entrepreneur. Nobody Is Safe.*, (Onomatopée, 2020.)

Conclusion

If it might be easy to catastrophize and fall into a wormhole of doubt and hopelessness, it is important to remember that the self is malleable, porous, and heavily influenced and we must remain mindful about what we let inside our brains. When we dig deep inside ourselves we find a 'pool' (as Nora Turato would put it) of thoughts framed by rapid thinking, time optimization and social expectation. They look like tweets. Our thoughts are loud and bold, well anchored in a network of content encouraging judgement. Everything is something or the opposite, and nuance is lost. So what does this lead to? If one embraces fully the economy of attention, we might end up with only two very polarized thoughts : yes/no, good/bad, black/white, life/death. But the truth is we stand in between of these truths, we live in a grey area, we're not sure of anything except that we stand between life and death. So why try to define ourselves so clearly? Why take shortcuts? How are we supposed to take the right decisions when we are pushed a vision of reality through the lens of extreme emotion, beyond reason and our own sense of morals?

We've seen with artists performing variations of their selves, that it is possible to reclaim power over the way we perceive ourselves, the way we display ourselves

and how we want to exist in society. These artists use their self-image not as a narcissistic exercise, but as a way to make social commentary, and it is easy for audiences to relate and identify as identity crises, mental issues and feelings of isolation spread faster than any pandemic.

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