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**Me, Myself and My Avatars:  
Exploring Alienation and Digital  
Identity through  
Self-Portraiture,  
Anthropomorphism, and  
Puppetry**



Rietveld Fine Arts, 2024



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Special thanks to Heleen Mulder & Saana Ó Nualláin

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## Introduction

What happens to my avatar when the computer is turned off? Where does my reflection go when I turn away from the mirror? These are some of the questions that lead up to my research. The various ways my reflection can take shape makes me wonder about the extent and limits of my body. I have countless profiles within the virtual space, each with their own username and password. Do they resemble separate parts of my online identity, or could they exist on their own?

Throughout time humans have doubled their image, ranging from various forms of self-portraiture to robotics and digital avatars. In my practice I think about the relation this creates between humans and their surrogate bodies. I believe these concepts are essential when thinking about our self-image. They allow us to understand our individual as well as our cultural identity. On the contrary, they also create a form of self-alienation as our physical bodies get more and more distanced from the complexity of our digital doubles. These body doubles that are present within the digital space in our profiles on social media and our characters in videogames, for example, serve as our way to traverse the otherwise inaccessible virtual world.

In this research I will elaborate on these concepts through different themes, amongst which anthropomorphism and immersion play an important role. They will be contextualized through test dummies, puppets and the concept of the stage. It is also important to take into account the power dynamics between puppets and their masters or creators. This idea relates to the other forms of the human double, like robots and

avatars. The combination of these topics will examine what it means to have a physical body in this modern time and shed light on our online presence and communication in relation to self-image.



## The Human Body and its Relation to the Self

Artists make self-portraits for multiple reasons. Mostly because they feel the need to assure themselves of their existence. One makes a self-portrait, which, in turn, will give them a form of self-awareness, similar to looking in a mirror or viewing a photograph of oneself. For me, this relates to when the first humans created cave paintings representing themselves amongst scenes of their daily life. To me, these paintings feel like a form of identification or marking. A modern-day equivalent could be graffiti or tagging. I feel this is an inherent part of being human, since the only thing we leave behind on earth are the physical changes we made to our surroundings. I am curious if the first humans had the consciousness to realize they were mortal and if they could think about their future and possible death. My guess is that this is not the case and that this mortal coil is a somewhat modern phenomenon, which might stem from the luxury of having spare time to contemplate other things, than solely survival. Making a self-portrait can create a form of self-awareness and reflection regarding the creator's self-image. This shows in the following text written by James Hall on the philosopher Plotinus:

*But more often than not – as in his reference to Phidias – Plotinus still believed that the work of art transcends material reality. An image reflected in water or a mirror, or formed by a shadow, is simply the material body of that object, and cannot exist apart from it. But this is not so with an image produced by an artist, even if it is a self-portrait. A self-portrait is not simply produced by the artist's material body (whether reflected or seen directly) but by the image dwelling in the artist's soul, which mirrors the divine.*

(Hall 2014, 1.2)

This idea of creating a self-portrait by imagining an internal image of oneself forces the artist to think about themselves in a way that is not guided by references, like pictures or a reflection. This could result in the purest form of self-portraiture as there is no distortion created by the translation into reality. However, this self-portrait would, in turn, only exist in the mind of the artist which is impossible to view for an audience. When I try this exercise, I notice the fact that it is not possible to capture a still image in my mind: the self-portrait seems organic and ever-changing. This is different from other ways of self-portraiture in which the image is still or in any case captured by a specific medium. Even a video of myself cannot change after shooting it, at least not without me altering or editing it. This way of thinking about myself forces me to define myself and thus be self-aware. In turn this could create an alienating feeling when the self-image in my head is different from the reflection I would normally see in a mirror, for example.



Fig 1. Atkins, Ed. *The worm* (2021), video projection with sound, loop, 12 min, 40 sec. Collection Hartwig Art Foundation. Promised gift to the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed / Rijkscollectie. Photo LNDWstudio. All rights reserved by Hartwig Art Foundation.

The utilization of self-image is a powerful tool for representing specific fears or illustrating a sense of alienation. For example, in his video works Ed Atkins uses motion capture to animate a digital avatar. He states this is similar to talking to oneself in the mirror. In his work *The Worm* (2021) we see an animated avatar sitting in a theatre-like situation. The artist, taking on the body of the digital avatar, has a conversation over the phone with his mother. To me, this too is a form of self-portraiture. However, in this case, the visual representation is a digital non-existing avatar. The fact that the voice of the avatar is still recognizable as the artist's and the conversation being very

personal, adds a human element that contrasts with the alienating digital character. This technique of doubling movements and other motions from the physical world into the digital is very striking to me, because it attempts to recreate an aspect that is native to human life into a separated digital reality. In doing so, some of the elements get distorted and glitched, creating a new instance. The technique used in Atkins' work is different from taking a picture or shooting a video. These techniques mirror the captured object, whereas motion capture completely copies a motion. Something that is almost impossible to do in physical reality, only synchronized jumping or marching come close.

Throughout the ages humans have created images that have anthropomorphic shapes. This happens especially often in a religious context. For example, when the ancient Greeks and Romans created their pantheons of gods these were all given bodies. Oftentimes these gods represent a human trait or vice, so it makes sense for them to be relatable by shape or form. In a way these gods relate to the unknown. As Guthrie points out Hume's argument below, humans tend to turn to higher powers for explanations on encounters they are unfamiliar with.

*Hume's argument anticipates much of the modern intellectualist position, as it appears for example in Tylor and in Horton (1993). It is quite general: human understanding is limited, but the environment with which it must cope is unlimited. Facing the complexity of our environment, we grasp it only partially and superficially, as an audience in a theatre in which most of the action takes place offstage. In our anxiety and our lack of adequate models for what we perceive, we fall back on the model with which we are most intimately familiar: that of ourselves. This is the basis for notions of gods. Hume's*

*theory thus combines what may be called the comfort and familiarity theories, both of religion and of anthropomorphism*

(Guthrie 2007, 33-34)

Applying this train of thought to the current day and age makes me wonder if there could be any gods that we relate to new technologies like the internet or AI, seeing as most people do not fully grasp the way they operate. However, it could be the case that, because these technologies operate with a user-friendly interface, us users are able to just accept the fact that it works without worrying about the backend.

Nowadays, we humans are doubling ourselves onto our own creations in the fields of robotics and artificial intelligence. There are new generations of robots that are becoming increasingly more human. I think this partially has to do with the fact that our world is completely optimized for human bodies. By that I mean that the accessibility of a lot of areas is basically non-existing for non-humans. So, in order for a robot to traverse our world it needs a similar way of moving. For example, it needs legs to use a set of stairs, fingers and hands to press buttons and hold objects. Another side-effect of creating robots in our own image is the relation it creates between us and them. We feel closer to them, and we can imagine a way of communication and interaction. This concept is explored in multiple Sci-Fi stories, where people might develop feelings for a non-human or physical entity, for example, in the movie: "Her" by Spike Jonze. In this movie the main character falls in love with an AI program that is created as a personal assistant and only exists as a digital voice. Another example of the relation between humans and AI can be found in the different Blade Runner movies. In the most recent movie *Blade Runner 2049* the concept of what it means

to be human is being explored. This is done through the main character K who is a *replicant* built to hunt down and *retire* other *replicants*. The *replicants* are fictional bioengineered humanoids that can be recognized by taking an empathy test with a polygraph-like machine. During the movie the main character gets the type of human characteristics that we as an audience tend to project onto it. For example, falling in love with a hologram. Another theme that is prominent within the movie is that of creation and who is allowed to create. The antagonist in the movie is the CEO of a replicant manufacturing company. In a sense, this character is creating life, that is if you consider the replicants to be alive. However, these lifeforms would be programmed to do their bidding and are in no way free willed.

The human depictions of alien lifeforms in early Sci-Fi look like green humanoid beings and thus also become a double of ourselves. This started in the 1950's with American comics. To me this shows a tendency in human thinking. We seem to be unable to imagine the endless possibilities of alien life forms. Similar to trying to think of a new colour, our brain does not seem capable of this task.

When thinking about mind-body dualism there is a clear distinction between the physical and non-physical. For me this concept is also present when we as humans enter the digital realm. Where is our body when entering a virtual space? Do we leave our physical bodies and create a new virtual avatar? To what extent does that avatar then relate to us? In some ways our mind passes into the digital as it is needed to control the avatar and "play". The amount of immersion affects the extent to which this is the case. The genre of videogames called role-playing games, or RPG for short, are most known for having a player immersed into the game. Examples of games

like this are series like “The Elder Scrolls” or “Fallout”. Both these titles have been developed by the same company: Bethesda. These games are known for their open world, allowing the player to create their own narrative within the game-world. The player either assumes the role of an existing character or creates their own. When the player is allowed to create their own character there are multiple possibilities, for example, someone can mimic their own appearance and create a version of themselves within the game. To me this is an interesting moment and can be seen as a form of self-portraiture. Another option is that someone creates an alter ego or a character that is not similar to themselves and roleplays as that avatar. Within some games there is the possibility of playing on a certain difficulty where your character is deleted when it dies in game; most often this level is called ‘Hardcore’. This creates a tighter relation between the player and their character as they could die and be deleted permanently. A sub-genre of these games is MMORPG. Which stands for massive multiplayer online role-playing game. One of the best-known games within that genre is World of Warcraft. What I find interesting about this sub-genre is the fact that there are thousands of players playing within the same world. This adds another layer to the extent of role-playing. The player can interact and be seen by other players. They are aware of their actions because there is a feedback loop in the form of “others”.

To summarize, humans have doubled their own image in different ways, like self-portraiture, among which the purest form of self-portraiture could be considered the imagination of a self-image by a person. Other occurrences of this concept are found in religious contexts and the character creation process within video games. Examining these examples is necessary

when thinking about alienation, self-alienation in particular. This term is defined in the Cambridge dictionary as follows: “a state in which someone feels that they are not connected to their own feelings and actions”. In the next part I will elaborate on this subject and give context within the field of contemporary art.

### **Self-alienation and Immersion**

Alienation can arise due to different reasons. I would like to elaborate on the following: the influence of advanced technology in various aspects of our lives, such as social media platforms, immersive video games, and the ability to alter physical appearances using plastic surgery or masks. An example of this is: “Snapchat Dysmorphia”. A term explained in the following excerpt of a journal article by Ramphul & Mejias.

*The two main applications in question included Snapchat and Instagram, both of which have 187-million and 600-million daily active users. These two applications provide filters that allow users to change their skin tone, soften fine lines and wrinkles, alter the size of their eyes, lips, and cheeks, and change various aspects of their physical appearance. Dr. Yagoda, a plastic surgeon, told the Huffington Post that he had observed many of his clients describing their desired changes, which corresponded to what the filters on these two applications could provide [3]. This claim was also supported by another plastic surgeon, Dr. Schulman. Renee Engeln, Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, has also pointed out that the common man is losing perspectives on what he/she actually looks like due to these two social media applications [4]. The term "Snapchat Dysmorphia" was thus brought to life.*

(Ramphul & Mejias 2018)



I believe this idea shows that humans have reached a point at which we are merging with digital space in a very complex way. We need it, it is impossible to ignore the internet. It is almost impossible to function in our physical society without traversing the digital space in the form of social media for example. We create countless profiles and avatars to act as our surrogate bodies within these online spaces. To me, the thought of all these characters “living” in datacentres or on our own hard disks feels quite cruel. It feels similar to the idea of a prison or zoo to me. They are only able to animate or activate when the user needs them. When we spend almost as much time within the physical reality as the digital one, which becomes more prominent? It almost feels similar to sleeping or dreaming. It is a distorted or altered version of reality. When I log out, where does my character go? This leads me to how extreme immersion, for example within virtual reality, can also lead to self-alienation. At the moment, the technology surrounding virtual reality is still developing. However, at a certain moment the barrier between physical and digital reality will most likely get blurred and our perception of digital reality could crossover into the physical. The more immersive the digital gets the more we might dissociate with objective reality.

When viewing digital images, the display inherently matters a lot. Multiple forms of display exist, some examples could be a beamed image, VR goggles and LCD screens. Most of these displays can vary immensely in scale and resolution. These changes determine the relation the audience has with the image. In general, I think there is a certain level of immersion that increases when viewing an image on a beamer, because the viewer is then able to walk in front of the projection. In this way, the viewer casts a shadow on the projection, and is aware of their own image transitioning onto the surface. When

viewing an image in VR, 'the viewer is allowed to be almost completely immersed in the image, seeing as it is also 3D instead of 2D (which is the case when an image is displayed on a screen or beamed onto a surface).

Everything exists only within my perception, at least this is the case for my personal experience. The idea of perception is merely individual. I am perceived through other people's perception of me. I will never know this experience. A mirror, digital picture or video can simulate this but never truly capture it. I take that as a comforting thought since I would believe it to be horrifying to see myself without any distortion to hide behind. I think this is a reason for some people to alter their physical appearance with the use of plastic surgery. This allows for people to mold their body similar to creating an avatar or character within video games. For me this concept is very disassociating I find it horrifying to imagine waking up and seeing a different face in the mirror. This is in contrast with dressing up, which I find a comforting thought and could be used to embody a different entity. For example, by wearing a mask or pretending to be someone else, I can hide my own identity – thus allowing me to do things I would normally feel too uncomfortable to do.



Fig 2. Atkins, Ed. *Safe Conduct*. 2016. Video still

This video work by Ed Atkins, which is part of a project titled *Safe Conduct* shows a 3D model of a person peeling off the skin of their face, in a manner that looks like it's taking off a mask. The face of the person is filled with small wounds and bruises. Their hand also shows some bruising in a way that can be seen when a person has been hitting things with their fists. However, the clothing and hair of the character are unscathed. Whilst repeatedly peeling off their skin the character is mumbling a rhythm. Every time the skin gets peeled off there is an incredibly horrible sound that is similar to whenever one would take a suction cup off of a piece of glass.

Repetition is a big factor in this video. The fact that this character keeps on peeling off their skin almost endlessly has a horrifying feel to it. It has a feeling of torture and penitence. Can this character leave when they have peeled their skin a

million times? Paradoxically, breaking out of one's skin is also a moment of relief can also be experienced as a moment of relief. In some ways that would be the afterlife, the moment of traversing into that other place that is supposedly better than where you are now. Because the subject in the video is recognizable as human we relate to it. Even though I am able to see that it is a rendered human body, rather than a real human, I feel empathy for them and can imagine myself being in their place. However, this is a frightening thought and makes me want to disassociate from the rendered human. Thus, alienating me from the image whilst at the same time captivating me with the relation my body has towards it. I also ask myself how this character got all these injuries, where was it before this video? The injuries do not necessarily look self-induced. However, the video doesn't show another actor that could've been the cause of this. The voice of the character is the same as the artist's, which plays a role in the dynamic between the artist and the character. Knowing that the character is voiced by the artist I look at the character in closer relation to the artist. It is now not a separate entity, but more of a vessel that is being used by the artist to share a message. It is like the artist entered the skin of the character and borrowed its being. Within the digital space we expect to see "perfect" objects and characters. I think this is the case because it is possible to shape and create the things within the digital to our liking, so almost all the time animators choose for these things to be perfect or errorless. In this video, however, the character is bruised and injured which is something we don't expect to see. For this reason, we are being made hyper-aware of that being the case and it becomes the focus of the video.

## Skin and Synthetic Skin

The skin is an integral part of the human body. It keeps us together and is the outer layer of our being. Because of this, it is the part we are most known for. Meaning that other humans recognize us by our skin. Of course, clothing also plays a big role in our self-expression. But if stripped away we are left with our skin as the final layer. I believe the concept of skin is also present online. For example, our profile pictures or our game-characters could be considered a type of skin. The term skin is also present in a video game context. Skins are cosmetic items you can apply to your characters or their items to make them appear different than they usually would. These are often a symbol of prestige as they are unlocked through certain feats or bought with real currency.



Fig. 3: de Bruyckere, Berlinde. *Aletheia, on-vergeten*. 2019, mixed media. Installation view.

In the work of Berlinde de Bruyckere, titled *Aletheia, on-vergeten*, the artist presents a big, open space with multiple pallets stacked with skin like material. Some of the pallets are stacked upon each other making for a pallet-skin-pallet-skin sandwich. I feel like these skins should be handled with more care. They seem delicate and have a sense of preciousness. Wondering what organisms were once contained in these skins makes for interesting speculation. It couldn't be humans; we are not that gigantic. The colours of the skins also suggest more animal-like creatures. Relating to my own body I am relieved I am not part of this pallet. I wonder whether more of these skins exist outside of this room. Where were they harvested? The tracks on the floor tell me some sort of truck might have driven them into the space. This also tells me something about the weight of the pallets. The silhouette of the sculptures has a grounded motion. I think this is because the pallet, which serves as the "stage" or pedestal for the skins, is a wide and horizontal object. On the other hand, the flat skins, also make for a stack that wants to move in a vertical motion. The whole room is covered in a white flaky material. This makes it seem as if snow has fallen in this room. This image really reminds me of video material in documentaries and pictures of concentration camps during the second world war. The way that these skins are displayed, almost like a material that could be shipped, sold or stored, makes me think about how humans or living animals are used as a product. So maybe these pallets of skins are waiting for a next purpose, and this is a transitional state in which we seem to have caught them. There is also no sign of what their future might be, and other than the traces of car tires there is also no sign of their past. Hanging from the ceiling are eight industrial lamps, each above one of the pallets. For me this symmetrical aspect creates some kind of grid, which

accentuates the feeling that somehow there might be a bigger organization behind these pallets. Like a shipping business.



Fig. 4: de Bruyckere, Berlinde. *Pietà*. 2007, mixed media. Installation view.



Fig. 5: de Bruyckere, Berlinde. *Into One-Another II To P.P.P.* 2010-2011, mixed media. Installation view.



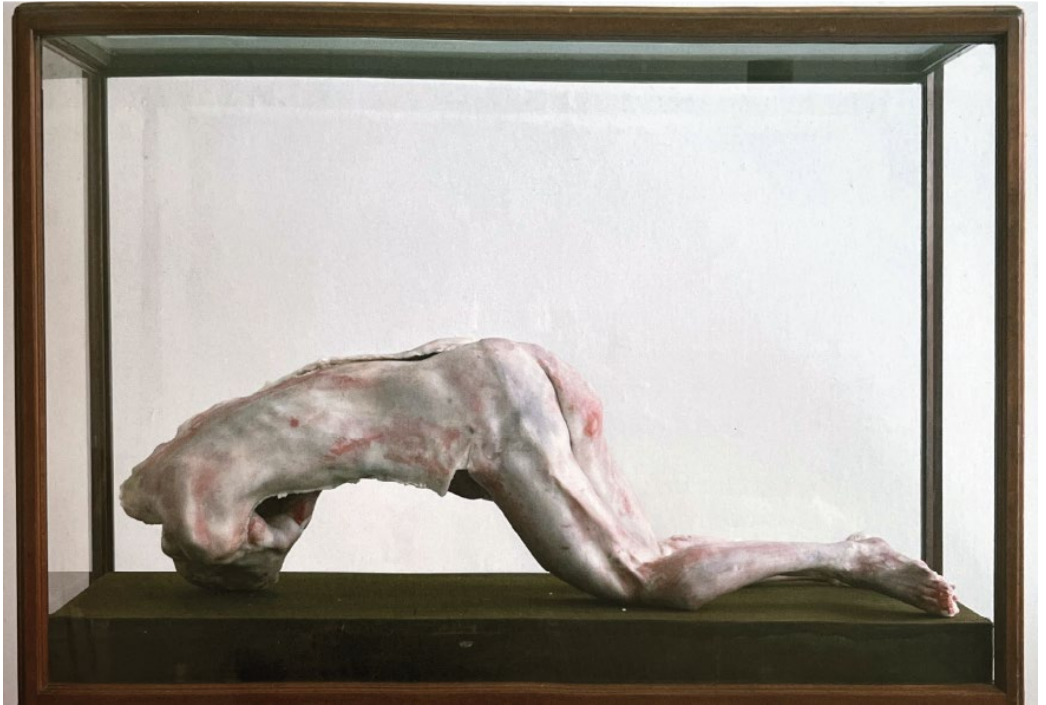


Fig. 6: de Bruyckere, Berlinde. *Into One-Another II To P.P.P.* 2010-2011, mixed media. Installation view.

In the series of works called: *Into One-Another To P.P.P.*, the artist created wax sculptures representing interlocked or deformed bodily shapes. When looking at these works, it feels as though some form of violence has overtaken the sculpture. For example, in the way that some parts of the body seem to be intact, and others cut open or ripped apart. I expect to see these forms in a butcher shop, however not with a human body. The sculpture is made from wax, which creates a smooth marble-like surface. This makes it seem as if the body is skinned, another gruesome and violent suggestion. For some reason the sculpture feels like a hollow shell, the soul has

already left or maybe was never even inside this body. The colours of the wax are essential, as they make the sculpture look like a body and make the material feel somewhat organic. If it were bright blue for example, it would seem like plastic and feel artificial. The red hue in the wax suggests bruising and some form of punishment or sacrifice. It looks as if the body has been tortured, the way the body is posed also plays into this thought. It has no arms anymore and is struggling to crawl forward, as if it is pushing with its final strength. When I look at this work and relate it to the pallets full of skins, I imagine this body to be the original owner of one of those skins and it makes me wonder if there is a place containing massive amounts of these deformed bodies. Most of which already got their skin taken off and some of which might still have their own. An important part of these bodily sculptures is that they are presented within cabinets. By doing so they are objectified and preserved. The body is seen behind a piece of glass, as if it were taken from its original habitat and displayed to an audience, similarly to how a taxidermist would display an animal.



Fig. 7: “A collection of anthropomorphic test devices (ATD) produced by Humanetics”.

*Crash test dummies simulate human response to impacts, accelerations, deflections, forces and moments of inertia generated during a crash. Each dummy is designed to model the form, weight and articulation of a human body. Hundreds of sensors and transducers located within the dummy provide life-saving data to safety test engineers, measuring the precise physical forces exerted on each body part in a crash event.*

*We develop special sensors to measure the forces that break bones and cause soft-tissue injuries. These readings are controlled and repeatable, providing vehicle designers with reliable data to enhance and refine product safety. Thanks to our advanced engineering and meticulous manufacturing, Humanetics dummies are highly sophisticated platforms that deliver trusted sensory intelligence.*

(“A collection of anthropomorphic test devices (ATD)  
produced by Humanetics”)

Test dummies are used to see if situations are safe enough for real humans. For this reason, they have certain human traits like their size, weight or synthetic skin that could be similar to ours. When reading the paragraph written on the product page of Humanetics, which is a company that produces these ATDs as they call them, we learn that they are full of sensors used to measure the amount of injury caused by a crash. If we relate this to humans, they would be measuring pain. The data collected could be considered the dummies scream and cry for help. I wonder if, at some point the dummies might become too realistic of a human surrogate, we would need ethical regulations. Like sedatives or pain regulation for the dummies. They are some of the unluckiest dolls. Maybe that is not the case as there are also erotic dolls which are being used without them having any say in it. I believe the way these dolls are being used to replace certain human interactions, as Harper states in the following text, creates a sense of alienation. It anthropomorphizes these dolls and partially de-humanizes humans as it suggests humans become more like them.

*An overwhelming proportion of the existing published scholarship on sex doll and robot ownership addresses, or at least seeks to address, the ethics of owning and engaging with sex dolls and robots. For example, scholars in bioethics, sociology, robotics, and legal studies have all cited concerns that sex dolls and robots encourage the sexual objectification of women and exacerbate traditional standards of beauty and perceptions of attractiveness [9, 10, 15, 20–24], with the ultimate effect of this being a loss of human intimacy and connection when it comes to sexual interactions [24–26]. At its extreme, this collection of work suggests that doll and robot ownership has the effect of promoting sexual violence and child sexual abuse, which in much of this work is erroneously synonymized as pedophilia [4, 6, 27, 28]. While many of these*

*claims make sense at face value, their empirical bases are open to challenge.*

(Harper 2020)

We can regard our body as a form of container, I believe there is an interesting play when this body is put inside another container. For example, the moment a body is put inside a coffin in order to somewhat preserve the body in that final moment, even though we know it will completely decompose given enough time. This is somewhat similar to shipping containers: we put an object inside them and ship it somewhere, hoping the contents will be preserved when reaching the destination. Our human body, when put inside a coffin or sarcophagus, might be sent on a journey to some other destination. When making this comparison I'm curious about the import taxes, delivery services and packaging material. I would want a "Handle with care" or "fragile" sticker on my shipping container. The only traces on a package that has been sent are the stickers on the box. It might have passed through different countries or traversed several borders and been stamped. Some indentations and other "bruises" might be visible on its skin.



Fig. 8.1: Quinn, Mark. *Self*. 1996, Blood (artist's), stainless steel, perspex and refrigeration equipment. Installation view.

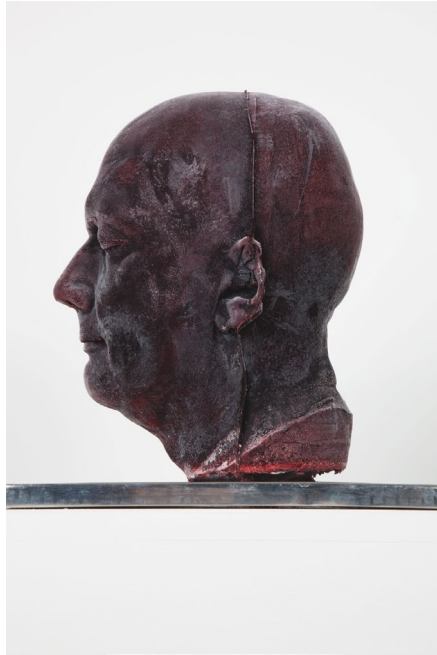


Fig. 8.2: Quinn, Mark. *Self*. 1996, Blood (artist's), stainless steel, perspex and refrigeration equipment. Installation view.

One of the materials contained within the skin is blood. This fluid is something I rather not have leaking out of me. In his series titled *Self* Mark Quinn makes replicas of his head out of his own frozen blood. This could be considered an inside out self-portrait, seen as how the body is flipped inside out. The outer layer of sculpture is made up of the insides of the artist. This contradiction is alienating to me as the material is so closely related to human life, yet the sculpture has a certain lifelessness. The artist's once so precious blood now turned into a popsicle that needs to be refrigerated constantly in order for it to stay solid.

## The Stage and Its Performers

There are many ways a doll or puppet can stand in for a human. This is often the case within theatre or performance in a broader sense. The doll makes for a surrogate body that can be used to depict scenes not suited for a human body. These marionettes often are restricted in the ways that they are able to move. They only move in ways necessary for the show and how the puppet master allows them.



Fig 9. Wolfson, Jordan. *Colored Sculpture*. 2016, mixed media. installation view

An example of an artist using a puppet within an artwork is the artist Jordan Wolfson who made an artwork titled *Colored*



*Sculpture*. It consists of a square metal framework. From it a boy-like puppet hangs by three metal chains linked to its head, an arm and a leg. These chains are mounted to motors connected to the frame. These motors run back and forth, thus moving the puppet across the floor. In the following quote by Paska, it is said that within puppet theatre lifeless objects become animated by active intervention of a living human operator.

*The essential fascination of puppet theater, its ability to engage and hold an audience, is a function of its nature as a theatrical activity consisting in the animation of lifeless objects (dead things) through the active intervention of a living human operator. The theatrical destination of the puppet also determines its distinction from the automaton, the mannequin and the doll, with their passive claims to formal autonomy as objects.*

(Paska 1998, 411-412)

In Wolfson's artwork the operator or puppeteer is a machine, not a living human operator, which challenges the idea of what a living human operator could imply. In the sense that this machine now gets some form of identity or character by projection. Which in turn makes the way that the machine drags the puppet, which appears to me as violent and careless, more human. This makes me feel empathy for the puppet as it is roughly life-sized and therefore relates to my own body and shape. I feel like the name of this artwork also suggests a specific form of violence towards the puppet, naming it "colored sculpture" therefore not acknowledging its existence with a specific name and degrading it to an object. I also consider this artwork to be time based since the puppet gets more and more beaten up and slowly loses its paint. Therefore,

at a certain moment in time it will just be a metal object and no longer contain its painted “skin”. I wonder if at that point we as an audience would feel more distance towards the puppet.

*The ubiquity of acting and performing bodies at the centre of theatrical activities, epistemologies and cultures often makes them both the subjects of, and the tools for communicating, performance research. Indeed, it might be argued that without bodies there is no theatre or ‘live’ performance. Simon Shepherd writes that theatre is ‘a practice in which societies negotiate around bodily value and bodily order. In that negotiation, theatre is not simply an art of bodies but an art of bodily possibility, an event where the limits of body are negotiated, fetishised, imagined somehow else’ (2006: 20). A researcher might, for example, analyse puppet theatre’s seeming absence of bodies for the ‘bodily possibilities’ it envisions, or by imaginatively reading the puppet body as ‘somehow else’ than a body. Hence, our focus on ‘bodies’ rather than ‘flesh’ or ‘self’ signals a broad category exceeding either biological substance or a singular sense of identity, a category open to various becomings rather than fixed notions of subjectivity.*

(Parker-Starbuck & Mock 2011)

As stated above, the stage or theatre is considered a place that centres around bodily possibility. To me, this turns the stage into a space that activates objects and bodies, which in turn are viewed by an audience. This can happen in a physical or virtual space. I imagine a video or videogame to also function as a form of a stage. In those cases, they provide a structure or framework in which objects and narratives are performed. Similar to within a theatre where an object is put on a stage and gets its performing quality. We expect things to perform and/or move us in a certain way when they are on stage. The

stage often is at an elevation or at least elevated to a different altitude than where the audience is seated. When we look up to a stage we feel in awe, overwhelmed and at the mercy of whatever is performing on the stage. When we look down onto a stage, we feel more distant, in control and out of touch with it. The stage can take on different shapes and forms. This depends on the nature of the performance that is happening on the stage. Some activities call for a circular movement whereas others are more rectangular with a clear opposition between the audience and the stage. Audiences often surround stages, contrarily stages do not normally surround the audience. The stage can be understood as a frame for the human body. It elevates it, so that it catches more attention. This is similar to when a painting is framed. In that case the frame gives a certain context to the picture. In the case of a stage this can mean multiple things, for example, the stage can support the acting body that is displayed atop it. In contrast the stage could also distance the viewer and bring other negative associations to mind; this can be done when viewing a subject in a cage or in another form of degrading stage. Another big part of the stages in which we expect to see human bodies is what the stage suggests in terms of action. When we look at a sports stadium, we expect to see people performing the sport in question. There is a form of unity in the audience, as well as a possible split between the people rooting for different teams.

Within the circus or theatre, a multitude of props and entities exist. These can serve different purposes that support the telling of a story. What interests me in these objects is the fact that they only exist within the framework of “the play”. They gain their legitimacy by being on that stage. If encountered in the outside world, one would see an object without power. They become empty vessels once they leave the stage. I think

the way we perceive these objects on a stage or in a play is similar to an artwork when it is presented on a pedestal or framed within a white cube. The object gains its believability from existing within these spaces. Another example of these concepts is special effects in movies. When seen in a video one believes in the impact they have. For example, a collapsing building or a protagonist's head exploding are things we would expect to see in specific films. When these actions occur within this frame, we as an audience allow for it to be believable. However, this also translates into the other media and information we consume. For example, watching the news or looking in newspapers. I believe we slowly get numb towards seeing real horrifying events, when we have seen them in movies and video games.

### **The Clown as The Alien**

I have several associations with clowns. It is a silly lovable persona that I feel empathy for. This happens because it is a character that has nothing going for them, almost everything goes wrong. However, even though they keep getting battered by the world, society or the audience, they have some sort of indestructibility to them. Somehow, they win by losing. Another important aspect of the clown is the fact they desperately try to cheer up the world around them. They are the support for the audience. However, this is mostly through pain and misery. So, it invokes some kind of sadism in the audience.

*The trickster and the clown participate in an other-worldliness, alien to a specific context or environment, and often partly spiritual or divine in nature. Victor Turner describes "liminal" in reference to the people who are being set apart for the purpose of initiation in sacred rituals: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention,*

*and ceremonial" (95). The experience of coming into a group as a clown - whether it is in a hospital room, or at 13 a festival, a party, or a mall - is like being an alien. The clown is set apart not only by costume and make-up but by perception of the world. According to Barbara Babcock-Abrahams sacred clowns like Kossa can have a special vision: "Kossa can see what no one else can perceive, that is, the invisible" (1984, 118). Pierrot lives in a world that is invisible to us until she makes it visible.*

(Proctor 2013)

This idea of the clown being alienated is important when thinking about the relation between the clown and their audience. They are somehow separated from us. I think this might also be the reason people tend to be okay with the clown's misery. They remind me of Sisyphus, a character within Greek mythology that lives in the underworld. His punishment is to have to roll a boulder up a hill but every time he reaches the top the boulder rolls back down, and he has to start over. This endless cycle of trying to make something work but failing at it again and again is something that I relate strongly to the clown. They often fail to perform simple acts again and again. In a sense these clowns are performing a kind of penitence.



Fig 10. Rondinone, Ugo. *Vocabulary of solitude*. 2015, mixed media. installation view

This idea of the clown suffering is different than in Rondinone's works with clowns. In the exhibition titled *Vocabulary of Solitude* which was shown in the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in 2016, amongst other artworks a group of 45 lifelike sculptures dressed as clowns could be seen. These clowns were all posed in a resting position, which is the opposite of what we expect of a clown. They also do not seem sad or in pain. There is a feeling of melancholy and loneliness, since they are all sitting by themselves and do not seem to interact with each other. To me, the way they are staged makes me wonder about what happened previously and what will happen in the future. It feels as if they are all on a break and will continue their show any minute. The audience becomes an intruder in their lunchbreak.

The mask or face paint worn by clowns is also an important aspect of their identity. This paint is almost like a second skin. I can imagine the performers changing into clowns when painting their faces. It also amplifies and exaggerates their facial expressions and emotions. It is a staple characteristic that also relates to traditional theatre where the performers painted their face or wore masks resembling certain overdone facial expressions. This was also done in ancient Roman and Greek theatre as the audience was too far away from them to see their facial expressions. This in turn alienates them from the viewer.

### **Power Dynamics Between Puppets and Their Masters**

When a doll is made it enters reality by the terms of their creator. The doll is shaped, clothed and animated by them. No doll has complete authority over their way of moving. It is determined by the puppet master, who chooses the future for the doll. It seems to me this concept is also present in the case of robotics and AI where the people creating the soft- and hardware are in complete control of their destiny. This can raise interesting questions on ethics. For example, within the field of AI, when does an AI program gain specific rights? We, humans, developed laws and values on which we act towards one another, however, we do not think to do the same when handling our computer or mobile phone. What if these machines were made to develop a consciousness and were able to communicate their feelings and dreams? Nowadays a lot of dangerous and repetitive actions that used to be done by humans have been replaced by machines; machines are more productive and do not complain. What can you use or abuse a machine for until it crosses a certain threshold and we do not feel like it should be allowed anymore?

This concept is explored in the movie: *Alien: Covenant* (2017) directed by Ridley Scott. In this film an android called David was given the human ability to create something new, rather than only replicate existing concepts. By doing this the humans created an entity that is able to surpass them. It then decides that the human race is inferior and obsolete. In order to put an end to them it creates a new organism, which is the “alien”. This creature turns out to be able to destroy civilization. What I find interesting in this case, is that the android which is created by humans has no need for its creator anymore. It has developed itself far enough to believe in its independence. This poses the question of who gets to have the right to create and who doesn't.

Another comparison that is often made is that of “the people” as puppets and the upper echelon as the puppet masters. Big companies and governmental institutions try to limit the amount of information and resources obtainable by the people, so that the power dynamic between them doesn't change and stays solid. This is similar to the fact that only the clergy, during medieval times in Western Europe, were able to read. They would keep the knowledge to themselves and only allow for the lower and middle class to hear their stories by the use of oral tradition or through paintings and depictions in stained glass.





## Conclusion

The human urge to double their image has been present for a long time. For example, by means of self-portraiture and anthropomorphism within, amongst others, religious contexts. This can be compared to the complex way in which the modern human being is intertwined with their digital counterparts. It creates elaborate forms of self-awareness that were non-existent before. It also results in alienation as people are constantly compared to these virtual personas. Another relevant development is the fact that we are slowly but surely creating physical doubles in the shape of robots. This brings up a multitude of ethical questions considering rights and regulations. At the moment, these questions are already relevant regarding test dummies and erotic dolls. This further contextualizes the notion of where the boundary may be drawn between a human body and an object. Furthermore, immersion is an important part of blurring the lines between physical and digital. When a person gets increasingly immersed in the digital, they might feel dissociated with physical reality. This can be compared to how different types of stages frame certain performances, which highly affects the audience's experience and perception.

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BA Thesis  
Rietveld Fine Arts

04/04/2024, Amsterdam  
Teachers: Ana Navas Dolinsek & Beckett Flannery  
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