

The Exhibition of the Hidden

Identity In A Media Saturated Environment

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Abstract

The Exhibition of the Hidden explores how personal identity forms within new media interactions. The spectacle of the virtual self, constructed of modified amplifications, conceal those parts of our lives that we consider substandard. Virtual experiences and the shiny surfaces of our media devices produce powerfully seductive forces. The lure of the seduction leads to a slippage of identity where we identify with the virtual amplification of self more than with the reality of our existence. According to Sherry Turkle, the self we use to relate to others is “itself” rather than “our self.” She states “When I speak of a new state of self, itself, I use the word “itself” with purpose. It captures, although with some hyperbole, my concern that connected life encourages us to treat those we meet online in something of the same way we treat objects-with dispatch.”¹ Our electronically navigated identity hides the messy and flawed circumstance of our human condition. The processes involved in creating and interacting with the coded world of media introduces the idea of virtual self-redemption.

Introduction to the Installation Elements

The oversized silver garment that towers over the installation signifies the amplified self. Referents of identity in new media purposefully manipulate images of self that push toward idealized standards set in mass media. The small rectangular pieces that make up the structure of the tunic represent the computer code hidden within media mediated identity. The rectangular shape mimics the frames that we use to navigate through the media stream. Stitched together the rectangles create a godlike image that commands attention. Separated the panels revert to their original form, scraps of fabric. The garment's

patchwork and computer code are constructed of small components which when strung together allude to human presence while concealing its absence. Turkle comments on this process by stating, "The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion, and self-create."² The oversized scale of the garment signifies the importance placed on virtual identity. The hidden nature of media exhibits itself in its amplification.

The smaller garments mimic their giant companion. The duplication and multiplication within electronic media accelerate migrations and alterations of self. Images and interactions change size and proportion depending on the operating system and device used to access them. The containment of the smaller versions of the garment behind the shiny surface of Plexiglas demonstrates the confining limits of the devices. Life exhibited within a media stream lives within the code. Luciano Floridi in his book, *Information: A Very Short Introduction*, comments that "We are modifying our everyday perspective on the ultimate nature of reality, that is, our metaphysics, from a materialist one, in which physical objects and processes play a key role, to an informational one."³ Electronic information carries the burden of representation of self; physical experiences transfer into digital formats for mass consumption.

The presence of the media players and the animations provide a constant distraction. Nicholas Carr uses his book *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* to discuss the changes that technology brings to our psychological and physical selves. He states, "The human brain is incapable of concentration on two things at once. Every glance or swipe at a touchscreen draws us away from our immediate surroundings. With a smartphone in hand, we become a little ghostly, wavering between worlds."⁴ Carr contends that we lose our

ability to be present in our physical worlds when we immerse ourselves in the media stream. The placement of the media players at eye level reinforces the distractive nature of the shiny surfaces and moving images.

The videos themselves created using a simple stop motion technique reference early examples of animation. The acceleration of technological advancements from grainy black and white film to what Carr labels as “hypermedia” increases not only the amount of information available but also the ways we process that information.⁵ He states that “Storing explicit memories and, equally important, forming connections between them requires strong mental concentration, amplified by repletion or by intense intellectual or emotional engagement. The Sharper the attention, the sharper the memory.”⁶ The omnipresence of media devices combined with the hyper nature of their displays creates an environment where memories accessed through computer code rather than our minds. We no longer memorize phone numbers we instead store them in automatic dial functions. Scenic vistas experienced through the screen of a cell phone are shared and sorted through social media applications. The screen with its allure draws our attention limiting the interactions with the rest of the installation. The large garment with its “godlike” size and shiny fabric loses its command of the space to the flickering of the video loops. We are programmed to look at the screen.

The generic profile silhouette forms the basis for each of the three short video loops. The building of online presence is broken down into three different components within the clips. The “share,” the “like,” and construction of the perfect profile picture compromise the essence of social media interactions. The choppy nature of the chalk drawings highlights the uncanny nature of our electronic other. The ever evolving advancements in media communications have pushed us toward a life where status based on the ability to obtain

“likes” provides our concept of relevancy. A rapid cycling of various identities has displaced the idea of a solidly forged identity according to Turkle.⁷ The exhibition of our amplified self demonstrates what we wish to hide. Distracted repetitively by a stream of information that lures us in with shiny surfaces and seductive graphics we hide our flawed humanness.

The chalkboard with its paper butterfly-covered surface anchors the installation in the gallery environment. The messy fingerprints and smudges seen in the artifact provide direct evidence of the artist's hand. The hand invisible in the video format reveals itself in the remnants of the process. The human imprint becomes noticed when attention diverts from the shiny surfaces of the media players. The butterflies used within the videos represent the temporary and transformative nature of electronic communications. The allure of the media stream is that it places a protective barrier against the messy parts of life. The beauty in life often is found in its imperfections.

Philosophical Rational

Each new advancement in technology further distances society from those imperfections. The capacity to Photoshop our images, edit our text and post and direct the narrative of our online presence pushes us further into the coded world of our devices. Marshall McLuhan in his work *The Medium is the Message* understood this contemporary concept in 1967. He wrote, “Media, by altering the environment evoke in us their unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act — the way we perceive the world.”⁸ The transparent nature of new media interactions strengthens the transforming effect of massive amounts of information in our lives. The scale and speed of today's media interactions have experientially amplified our human experience. A larger platform to exhibit our electronically enhanced self demonstrates its

presence in the desire for faster, smarter, newer media devices. The confining ratio of an identity formed around our bodies disallows the aspirations of a “godlike” self. The individual capable of fitting the oversized garment presents itself in the virtual realm.

The merging of concepts of self with computer platforms creates a slippage of identity where we merge with the technology. Boundaries between virtual and physical have eroded into 3D virtual reality simulations. Jean Baudrillard in *The Precession of Simulacra* wrote, “Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity.”⁹ The physical nature of our existence disappears into the construct of our uncanny electronic other. Baudrillard used the term simulacra to describe the progression of imagery from those based in reality to images that have no to reference in the physical realm whatsoever.¹⁰ Media interactions promote the same type of slippage of self. Our virtual self like a generic profile silhouette bases himself or herself on an absence of reality.

Baudrillard and Maclean in an article titled, *The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in Media*, predicted in 1985 that the increase of information in media would erode our concept of reality. They anticipated that “The situation no longer permits us to isolate reality or human nature as a fundamental variable. The result is therefore not at all any additional information or any light on reality, but on the contrary, because of the fact that we will never in the future be able to separate reality from its statistical, simulative projection in the media, a state of suspense and of definitive uncertainty about reality.”¹¹ The ambiguous nature of the data drives us to an obsession with its constant flow of information.

Observations of Societal Trends

The need to stay connected and affirmed overrides concerns about privacy and control. The connections link together to form the virtual self that exhibits itself within the media stream. A series of text, digitalized images, and sounds make up interconnected projections of self. Floridi asserts "In many respects, we are not standalone entities, but rather interconnected informational organisms or inforgs, sharing with biological agents and engineered artifacts a global environment ultimately made of information, the infosphere."¹² The oversized silver garment with its interconnected rectangles demonstrates the dominant nature of such constructs. A typical human cannot wear the garment; it wasn't designed for that purpose. Our identity on line manifests as oversized manipulations of boxes of information.

The malleability of on line identity manifests in careful grooming of electronic profiles. The center video loops through such changes. The figure morphs from male to female in a state of constant flux. The concepts that physical traits form the bases of authentic identity are left behind within electronic interactions. Turkle describes the societal shift by saying, "...we are learning to see ourselves as plugged-in technobodies, we are redescribing our politics and economic life in a language that is resonant with a particular form of machine intelligence."¹³ Simple manipulations of photos and overstatements of accomplishments no longer suffice in their illusionary properties. Society saturated in high-speed consecutiveness demands higher levels of self-manipulation. Online identity as a signifier has become so important that the political leaders and entertainers hire professionals to protect their online image. These professionals create an alternative persona that the public is encouraged to interact with

via Twitter or Facebook. The reality of who is communicating is lost to the platform and performance built into the media stream.

The early stages of new media maintained a high level of confidence in mass communications. A.N. Whitehead stated in his book, *An Introduction to Mathematics*, "Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them."¹⁴ First published in 1911 Whitehead's ideas coincide with those being explored in cinema and other forms of mass media. Stanley Kubrick's 1968 science fiction movie *2001* opens with a group of monkeys discovering a black monolith. The shiny black rectangle tempts the primates into touching its surface. Reaching out to connect to the surface unlocks the knowledge of technology for the beasts. The movie's focuses on how technology interfaces with humanity both in times in the distant past and in the future. The two societies are lured into their destruction by the seductive black box of technology. The resemblance of the monolithic structure to cellphones, tablets, and flat screen TV's of today ties the historic movie's message to our obsession with our devices.

The costuming used in *2001 A Space Odyssey* influenced fashion trends of the late 1960's and early 1970's. The silver spacesuits worn by the humans while approaching the monolith on the moon signify the highest degrees of human development. The evolved human willing to risk it all in pursuit of scientific knowledge is signified in the wearing garments made of a fabric more associated with machine than humanity. The metallic surfaces unify the body with the schematics of the technology. The persistence of the relationship between shiny silver fabric and sci-fi ideals of remain in today's fashion industry. Lady Gaga in her 2014 appearance at the 37th Annual Kennedy Center Honors wore a silver wig and pant suit that referenced earlier cultural associations. The choice to

construct the garments in the instillation out of shiny silver fabric ties the construction of identity to the promises of technological salvation, an identity tied closely to media devices.

Nicholas Carr discusses the relationship we have with machines by stating, “In a well-built machine, we see some of our deepest aspirations take form: the desire to understand the world and its workings, the desire to turn nature's power to our own purposes, the desire to add something new and of our own fashioning to the cosmos, the desire to be awed and amazed.”¹⁵ The accelerated pace of technological innovations raises the threshold of our expectations. We require constant access to a wider and wider circle of information, access to that information at higher rates of speed and accompanied with high production graphics and video components. The goal of a singularity approaches reality with each new generation of upgrades. The choppy glitches of early animation and film have given way to the hyperreality found in new media.

Conclusions

The technological races of the Cold War years saw their climax in the production of the Apollo Missions. The computer filled mission control room in Huston was my first memories of computers. My family sat around the TV with each mission hungry for information about what NASA was pursuing. Saturday mornings were spent watching the *Jetsons* and daydreaming about being able to use the video conferencing phone portrayed in the cartoon. The largest change in technology that made its way into my home growing up was the switch from black and white TV to a color console during my sophomore year of high school. The introduction of personal computers into everyday life occurred for me later in life. The fast pace of subsequent innovations at times feels overwhelming. I am what Luciano Floridi terms a digital alien. I am a foreigner in a computer-aided universe.

He observes that, "Once digital immigrants like us are replaced by digital natives like our children, the e-migration will become complete and future generations will increasingly feel deprived, excluded, handicapped, or poor whenever they are disconnected from the infosphere, like a fish out of water."¹⁵

Today's life immersed in a constant stream of media erodes concepts of identity as well as reality. My initial enthusiasm for all forms of new media cools with the realization of what is hidden within our shiny other. The exciting concept of being able to see the person who I am talking to on the phone is replaced with a longing to talk face to face with that person. The ease of electronic communications diminishes the need to bother with human-to-human contact. Life constructed of boxes of text or squares of fabric exhibit a discontent with the human condition. The idol like nature of such identity separates us not only from our flaws but also from each other. The oversized glorification of such constructs creates an environment where all that is being displayed is our emptiness.

The various components within the Exhibition of the Hidden combine to form an experience. The supersized garment, the flickering screens, the chalkboard artifact, as well as the carefully displayed miniature garments work together to lure the gallery guest to come closer. The title of the installation introduces the thought that something is hidden. The various components in their individual characteristics exhibit a part of what is hidden within identity formed within the constant flow of media interactions. We exhibit dissatisfaction with our human condition in the amplification of our modified self. The shiny surfaces highlight rather than hide the synthetic nature of such identity. The duplication and multiplication of the rectangular structures through which we gather and distribute information combine to demand godlike attention. The exhibit asks the viewer to question what is being hidden. The shiny surfaces demand attention but are limited in the

information that they provide. The QR code provides a point of contact to further the discussion. A link to my Twitter account allows the viewer to go beyond the gallery experience to participate in the discussion of where media mediated identity is leading us.

<http://twitter.com/EmpressPamela#Exhibition>

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Endnotes

¹ (Turkle, *Alone Together* 2011, 168)

² (Turkle, *Life on the Screen* 1995, 180)

³ (Floridi 2010, 12)

⁴ (Carr, *The Glass Cage* 2014, 200)

⁵ (Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing To Our Brains* n.d., 120)

⁶ (Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing To Our Brains* n.d., 193)

⁷ (Turkle, *Life on the Screen* 1995, 179)

⁸ (McLuhan 1967, 149)

⁹ (Baudrillard 1983, 256)

¹⁰ (Baudrillard and Maclean 1985, 580)

¹¹ (Baudrillard 1983, 256)

¹² (Floridi 2010, 9)

¹³ (Turkle, *Life on the Screen* 1995, 177)

¹⁴ (Carr, *The Glass Cage* 2014, 20)

¹⁵ (Whitehead 1948, 191)

¹⁶ (Floridi 2010, 12)





















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