

Identity Remix – A Simulacrum of the Self in Contemporary Art¹

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Abstract. This article analyses the conceptions of identity in contemporary times by delving into art practices from the 1970s onwards that deal with topics such as the construction of the self, identity as simulacrum, gender as masquerade, cyberfeminism, the cyborg, the techno-medical body or online identity fluidity. In the information and digital era, new technological, medical and scientific developments like genetic engineering, biotechnology, surgical and hormonal procedures and the Internet permeate our lives, affecting the perception, representation and understanding of the self. Through the analysis of the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson, ORLAN and Francesca da Rimini, this article examines contemporary art practices that reflect on these current issues, mirroring contemporary changes, subverting homogenising and repressive articulations of identity, and considering the new malleability, reproducibility and plurality of the self. These art practices ultimately represent the merging of human and machine, of original and copy, of natural and artificial, of the corporeal and the virtual.

Keywords: Cyborg; simulacrum; Lynn Hershman Leeson; ORLAN; Francesca da Rimini; performance; gender; technology; plastic surgery; online identity; digital era; identity fluidity.

[es] Collage de identidades – Un simulacro del yo en el arte contemporáneo

Resumen. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las múltiples concepciones de la identidad en la *época* contemporánea, ahondando en prácticas artísticas desde 1970 hasta la actualidad que tratan temas como la construcción del *yo*, la identidad como simulacro, el género como mascarada, el ciberfeminismo, el *cborg*, el cuerpo tecno-médico o la identidad fluida *online*. En la era digital y de la información los avances tecnológicos, médicos y científicos como la ingeniería genética, la biotecnología, los procedimientos quirúrgicos y hormonales e Internet impregnan la vida de los ciudadanos, cambiando la percepción, la representación y la idiosincrasia del *yo*. A través del estudio de la obra de Lynn Hershman Leeson, ORLAN y Francesca da Rimini, este artículo examina prácticas artísticas contemporáneas que reflexionan sobre dichos temas reflejando los cambios recientes, subvirtiendo aquellas articulaciones de la identidad que tienden a la homogenización y a la represión y poniendo de relieve lo maleable, reproducible y plural del *yo*. Estas prácticas artísticas representan fundamentalmente la convergencia de lo humano y lo *maquínico*, el original y la copia, lo natural y lo artificial, lo corpóreo y lo virtual.

Palabras clave: Ciborg; simulacro; Lynn Hershman Leeson; ORLAN; Francesca da Rimini; performance; género; tecnología; cirugía plástica; identidad *online*; era digital; identidad fluida.

Sumario. 1. Introduction. 2. The Theatre and Technology of the Contemporary Self. 3. The Surgically-Altered Body. 4. Online Identity Performance. 5. (In)Conclusion.

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*The self does not exist. There is only a simulacrum of the self and this simulacrum is an option that can be chosen*³

1. Introduction

From masquerading to performance practices, from surgical operations to virtual avatars, there are different forms of identity construction within the contemporary age, explored by contemporary artists and theorists, who take into account their potentiality and their coerciveness. By exploring themes of personal identity, in particular through the cultivation of alter-egos and the physical or textual alteration of the self, artists embrace the malleability and instability of the postmodern self. As Sherry Turkle declared, ‘new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity.’⁴ In these new explorations of the self, the boundaries between human and machine, man and woman, subject and object, the authentic and the artificial are not clear-cut. They become intimately intertwined so that the human being turns into a mixture of particles, bits, pixels, genes, DNA structures, prosthetic devices, virtual projections, synthetic hormones, and so on. According to Paul B. Preciado, identity, gender and sexuality have now become ‘synthetic, malleable, variable, open to transformation, and imitable, as well as produced and reproduced technically.’⁵ Contemporary citizens now belong to a copy-paste culture of cloning, virtual selves, surgically-altered bodies, genetic mutations and artificial intelligence. We can no longer tell the difference between the real and the virtual, the organic and the inorganic, the original and the copy. In this regard, Jean Baudrillard’s theories on the concept of simulacra become of utmost importance throughout this analysis, as well as Donna Haraway’s 1985 ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.’ Both theorists understand that we are completely mediated beings living in fully mediated worlds, thus escaping the notions of the authentic, stable and solely biological/natural self/world. In this way, following Baudrillard’s theories, ‘the era of hyperreality begins,’ an era in which ‘the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these.’⁶ Through technological and medical means, we have become replicable and reproducible bodies.

³ Weibel, P. (2015). The Work of Lynn Hershman Leeson: A Panoply of Identities. In P. Weibel (Ed.), *Lynn Hershman Leeson. Civic Radar*, exh. cat., (pp. 44-55). Karlsruhe: ZKM, 50.

⁴ Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 178.

⁵ Preciado, P. B. (2013). *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. New York: The Feminist Press, 106.

⁶ Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. (S. Glaser, Trans.). Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2 and 124 (original in French, 1981). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9904>

This study encompasses art practices from the 1970s until the twenty-first century with a special focus on technology as a form of reconfiguration and re-articulation of identity. There is also a strong focus on female artists that deal with these topics as part of a feminist and cyberfeminist practice. These artists present identity/gender/sex/race as something constructed, imposed upon or performed rather than as a biological given. In contemporary culture, advertising/pharmacological/medical institutions along with new media industries construct idealised identities, gender dichotomies and social stereotypes, rejecting and marginalising any image that does not fit the standardised canon (a canon of young and healthy-looking zero-fat bodies that can be either feminine or masculine)⁷. The tension between the emancipatory and the coercive qualities of the new medico-technological developments is explored by analysing the excluded/invisible/silenced images/voices that still exist in this era of extreme mobility, in a world that is paradoxically overpopulated with images and characterised by over-visibility and global accessibility of information. Artists like Jo Spence, Jenny Saville and Francesca da Rimini uncover, critically replicate and subvert the status quo by making visible those bodies and identities that are generally excluded, embracing an alternative and multiple self. Rosi Braidotti defines this ‘critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity.’⁸

To the artists herein mentioned, identity is neither inside nor outside, neither subject nor object, neither female nor male, neither biological nor technological; it is everything and nothing; it is abject, to use Julia Kristeva’s term. It is malleable, multiple, heterogenous, ever in process. This, however, is not always seen as something positive and subversive. In the age of immaterial labour, in which we are required to be fluid, flexible and permanently connected to the Internet, this is seen as an authoritative demand rather than a step towards freedom. Moreover, the fact that we have created a co-dependent and symbiotic relationship with technology, which now dominates our everyday lives, has led to the fear of an imminent ecological catastrophe, to an increasing control over citizens and to the commodification of human data. As Braidotti indicated, ‘advanced capitalism both invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives,’ what she describes as ‘the commodification of Life by bio-genetic advanced capitalism.’⁹ This era presents ubiquitous (self-)surveillance, which turns our bodies into public data-bodies that become manipulable and consumable, making us questionable owners of our own identities. Kim Toffoletti declared, ‘when humanity is reduced to genetic code or flesh is made into data, it becomes reproducible and interchangeable, challenging the integrity of the human subject.’¹⁰

Essentially, this article examines three forms of identity and gender construction in contemporary art and culture: the cyborg, the surgically-altered body and the virtual avatars, thereby contributing to the understanding of identity as something malleable, as a claim for plurality. According to the cyberfeminist Sadie Plant, ‘this new malleability is everywhere: in the switches of transsexualism, [...] the indelible markings of brands and scars, the emergence of neural and viral networks, bacterial

⁷ Preciado. *Testo Junkie*, 105.

⁸ Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 49.

⁹ *Ibidem.*, 49.

¹⁰ Toffoletti, K. (2007). *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls. Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 146.

life, prosthesis, [...] vast numbers of wandering matrices.’¹¹ This leads to a world in which ‘clear distinctions between what is real and what is virtual, where the body ends and technology begins, what is nature and what is machine, fracture and implode.’¹² In this way, current understanding of the human being and the human body is altered by surgical operations, biotechnology, genetic engineering, artificial reproduction and the Internet, which is why it is important to reconsider and rearticulate traditional discourses on identity.

2. The Theatre and Technology of the Contemporary Self

Identity construction is a recurrent theme throughout the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson, which encompasses painting, media art, digital art, performance art, interactive art and filmmaking. Her oeuvre is a product of her historical, socio-political and cultural context(s); it reflects and subverts the myriad of ideas that were flourishing from the 1970s onwards, from gender performativity to Haraway’s cyborg theories. Hershman Leeson addresses identity and gender issues, constructing multiple alter-egos and depicting a fluid state of identity. In Tracey Fugami’s words, her work ‘points toward the idea that identity is a fluid embodiment that can traverse roles and personas.’¹³ In her art, there is no fixed, stable, unified and authentic self, but rather, an amalgamation of unstable, fictional, dynamic and artificial selves. These personae mirror their times and are situated in the threshold between art and life, fiction and truth.

Hershman Leeson’s most well-known alter-ego and artwork, *Roberta Breitmore* (1974-1978), was born in consonance with the second-wave feminism in the U.S. and evolved during the following decades according to the changes that occurred within society, thereby turning into *CybeRoberta* (1995-98) or *Roberta in Second Life* (2005), both of which address the new technological developments of the 1990s and 2000s. Through her art, Hershman Leeson analyses and mirrors culture and society, the ways individuals present themselves, how they interact with each other and how women are constructed. Roberta was created at a time when women artists were exploring issues of feminine identity and subjectivity, particularly through performance art. Feminist art practices presented identity and gender as something that is constructed, enacted and performed daily, rather than as a biological given¹⁴. In accordance with this feminist movement, Roberta came to life through a series of live performances, mimicking how women were expected to behave in society. In the artist’s own words, ‘Roberta was a kind of portrait of how culture represents the identity of women.’¹⁵ Through Roberta, Hershman Leeson portrayed this stereotypical feminine identity, product of a patriarchal world, and camouflaged herself in society.

¹¹ Plant, S. (1998). *Zeros + Ones. Digital Women + The New Technoculture*. London: Fourth Estate, 177.

¹² Toffoletti. *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, 2.

¹³ Fugami, T. (2006). B.C. and A.D. Hershmanlandia: The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson (Review). *afterimage*, 33(4), 43-45, 44.

¹⁴ For an elaborated account regarding this topic, see: Butler, J. (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁵ Hershman Leeson, L. in T. Bazzichelli (2011). Hacking the Codes of Self-representation: An Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson. *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, 17(1), 28-33, 30. [http://dx.doi.org/10.5900/SU_9781906897116_2011.17\(1\)_28](http://dx.doi.org/10.5900/SU_9781906897116_2011.17(1)_28)

She applied makeup, she wore a blonde wig, she crossed her legs when sitting down, she was shy and psychologically unstable, she worried about her weight, she feared sex, she felt frustrated, stressed and trapped. This series of performances emphasised Hershman Leeson's conviction that womanhood is constructed in everyday life and influenced by the socio-political demands of the time. In David E. James's words, her work supports 'an understanding of the self as a social process.'¹⁶ This can be traced back to Joan Rivière's notion of "masquerade." According to Rivière, 'womanliness [...] could be assumed and worn as a mask,' which is what happens through Hershman Leeson's oeuvre¹⁷. Masquerading, whether through makeup, wigs, masks, virtual avatars or personae, is a key aspect of her artistic creations.

Along the lines of Rivière's theories, artists and theorists of the 1960s and 1970s embraced the loss of the unity of the subject. Identity became in their eyes, to use Braidotti's words, 'non-unitary, split, in-process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional, nomadic;' it encompassed fluid, fragmentary and complex aspects of the self¹⁸. Hershman Leeson, through her enactment of Roberta and her following creations, responded to all this, adding to these interpretations of the malleable self yet another layer: the technological, which is explained further on. To her, all these layers were part of the multiplicitous process of becoming, which gave rise to the postmodern self, a decentred and fully political subject¹⁹. This postmodern identity was described by Amelia Jones as 'simulacral and without an "essential" core,' as a copy without original, an aspect that will recur throughout this study²⁰.

During these decades of the late twentieth century, feminist activists fought for the reordering of social, economic and political systems, for gender equality in the workplace and in everyday life and for the reproductive rights of women. These activists created a climate of racial, gender and sexual liberation, and artists of the time inevitably drew on and reflected these ideas. Artists like Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin or Sophie Calle focused on the representation of constructed identities in their art practices, reflecting on the performativity of the self. They presented identity as a masquerade, and their work often involved the enactment and construction of multiple artificial personae. For instance, in the *Bus Riders* (1976) or *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) series, Sherman enacted different personae with the help of outfits, wigs and makeup. These photographs were staged and performed by the artist herself, who chameleonicly crossed genders and races. The theatricality of Sherman's staged photographs coincides with the theatricality of being, the performativity of gender in everyday life. In a similar way, Hershman Leeson performed her character Roberta.

What characterises Hershman Leeson's work is the way she intertwines art and life. While Sherman's work was restricted to the artistic field, Hershman Leeson

¹⁶ James, D. E. (2005). Lynn Hershman: The Subject of Autobiography. In M. Tromble (Ed.), *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Secret Agents, Private I* (pp. 145-158). Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 146.

¹⁷ Rivière, J. (1929). Womanliness as a Masquerade. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 10, 303-313, 306.

¹⁸ Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 3.

¹⁹ Mitchell, W. J. T. in S. C. Hertler, H. H. Krauss and A. W. Ward (2017). The Postmodern Self: Personal Persistence and its Absence in Contemporary Life Narratives. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 57(2), 127-151, 130.

²⁰ Jones, A. (2005). Roberta Breimore Lives On. In M. Tromble (Ed.), *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Secret Agents, Private I* (pp. 104-111). Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 107.

created a persona, Roberta, who was part of society: she acted as a common citizen and interacted with different members of society. Proofs of her existence in “real” life are her bank account, her driver’s licence, the credit cards she possessed, hotel registrations, and so on. There was a rigorous documentation of her actions and of her interaction with some members of society (for example, her psychologist and the dates she met), who were oblivious to the fact that Roberta was, in fact, a work of art. The amalgamation of these documents, features and photographs composed this artificial identity. This enabled other people ‘to take on the role of Roberta and to operate as Roberta in the real world.’²¹ In this way, fiction and reality are interwoven and it becomes difficult to distinguish self from double, original from copy, returning to Jones’s concept of the simulacral self. In relation to this, Peter Weibel stated, by ‘showing the self as unstable, a play of imitations, Hershman Leeson’s work demonstrates the fictional nature of the “self” through a narration that constitutes a simulacrum.’²² This provides a direct link with Baudrillard’s book *Simulacra and Simulation*, in which he explains the collapse of the boundaries between the real and the simulacrum. In this way, her work presents identity as ‘a simulation [that] threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.”’²³

Ultimately, Hershman Leeson’s oeuvre stands out due to her interest in the technological developments of her time. She studies how technology affects the understanding of the self. For this reason, her work became ahead of her time, which might be the reason why she has received more critical attention recently, especially in relation to her concerns with technology and the cyborg figure, which are more relevant to today’s technological environment. Haraway’s famous essay ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1985) is of utmost importance regarding Hershman Leeson’s interpretation of the cyborg. At the beginning of the essay, Haraway describes the cyborg as ‘a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.’²⁴ This in-between space, between technology and biology, between fact and fiction, is the space Hershman Leeson’s artworks occupy. Despite the influence of Haraway’s essay, one must take into account the fact that it was written in the 1980s, a time when technology was not as rooted in society as it is now. The technological environment has changed very rapidly in the digital and information era, an era of constant surveillance, of biotechnology, cloning, 3D bioprinters, cyborgian imagery, virtual realities, and so on. In this regard, Hershman Leeson keeps updating her art practices, echoing Haraway’s essay, but remaining aware of the recent changes and evolving alongside technology.

Given Hershman Leeson’s line of work, centred on the representation of the self as multiple and constructed, it seems inevitable for her to draw on the cyborg and posthumanist theories, which encompass the technological developments of her time and the feminist ideals she had previously fought for through her art practices. In relation to these new theories, the artist herself stated:

²¹ Sillars, L. (2015). In *Modern Art Oxford* [this is tomorrow]. Lecture on Lynn Hershman Leeson, online video clip, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wvGg19dVlc> [25 February 2018]

²² Weibel. *The Work of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, 46.

²³ Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

²⁴ Haraway, D. (1991). *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. In D. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 149-181). New York: Routledge, 149.

Once we used the words persona, robots or actors. Now the terminology for counterfeited representation in the life of digital bodies includes avatar, cyborg or synthespian [...] The data is itself a representation of the ubiquitous virtual post human essence, a new curve in our evolving cyborg posture²⁵.

Therefore, instead of enacting fictional personae, Hershman Leeson started creating cyborgian creatures, telerobotic dolls, data-bodies, clones and avatars that embrace 'the transformation of humanity through its coupling with technology.'²⁶ These cyborg figures, although born in the midst of the Cold War militarism and patriarchal capitalism, can turn into a feminist image of empowerment. Both Haraway and Hershman Leeson's work consider the cyborg a figure of emancipatory potential, a site of contestation. However, whereas Haraway affirms that 'the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world,' Hershman Leeson is aware of the fact that these hybrid creatures are still subject to gender, social and political inequalities²⁷. Accordingly, her creations are generally (female) gendered. In the essay 'Of Bodies and Technologies,' Alice Jardine explained that technology is still linked to gender, since it 'is represented either as a virgin, [...] neutral, obedient and subservient to man, or as a vamp, threatening and out of control.'²⁸

Jardine's technological image of the threatening and seductive vamp is seen in Hershman Leeson's *Phantom Limb* (1985-2004) and *Cyborg* (1997-2001) series, a group of manipulated photographs in which she constructs half-human, half-robot femme fatales, eroticised and/or menacing female bodies merged with identity numbers, machinic symbols and technological apparatuses. These images seem more relevant in today's world, a world in which 'we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras,' a world that is viewed and constructed through technology²⁹. Furthermore, by making use of these gendered bodies, Hershman Leeson illustrates the fact that the female gender, traditionally linked with nature, can occupy and appropriate the technological field and be identified with it, using it as a new configuration of female subjectivity. These series represent images of female empowerment and they also embody men's fears towards controlling and seducing women. Just as the image of the eroticised mermaid assaulted the predominantly-male maritime world, the figure of the (female) cyborg emerges, invading the male-dominated technological world.

This inhabitation of the technological field can also be observed in Hershman Leeson's work *CybeRoberta* (1995-1998), in which the alter-ego Roberta is transformed into a cyborg doll, who was then cloned and copied as *Tillie*. Afterwards, they were both renamed *The Dolly Clones*, who were among the first telerobotic devices linked to the Internet³⁰. This never-ending story, the construction of copies of copies, the multilayeredness of this matrix in which reality and fiction are inter-

²⁵ Hershman Leeson, L. (1993). Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)Space. In Weibel. *Lynn Hershman Leeson. Civic Radar*, 367.

²⁶ Zylinska, J. (2002). *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*. London; New York: continuum, 10.

²⁷ Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 150.

²⁸ Jardine, A. (1987). Of Bodies and Technologies. In H. Foster (Ed.), *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (pp.151-158). Seattle: Bay Press, 151.

²⁹ Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 175.

³⁰ Tromble. *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, 190.

twined creates multiple meanings and readings. By delving into the themes of the cyborg and cloning, Hershman Leeson constructed new techno-human identities. Both dolls, *CybeRoberta* and *Tillie*, had webcams installed in their left eyes and video cameras in their right eyes so that they became surveillance and voyeuristic devices, and, as Hershman Leeson stated, ‘voyeurism and surveillance tactics have become extensions of our “I” in present times³¹. On the one hand, visitors could explore these artworks in the physical space of the gallery, seeing themselves reflected in a monitor when stepping into the area captured by the dolls’ eyes. On the other hand, users could also access these artworks through the Internet, and by seeing through the dolls’ eyes and controlling the movement of their heads, they became virtual cyborgs, using the dolls as a form of augmenting their human capacities, as virtual prosthetic entities. These works represent a ‘prosthetic model of human identity’ that depicts technology as a part of our being and perception rather than as an external and strictly utilitarian tool or instrument³². Technology restructures human bodies, contaminating biology, the original self, and turning us into what Mark Poster calls ‘the new order of humachines.’³³ This provides an entry into the posthuman world that is unable to distinguish original from copy, prosthesis from body, implant from given materiality. Through these twin dolls, Hershman Leeson not only addresses the themes of the cyborg, identity, ontology and gender, but also contemporary issues of technological surveillance and perception.

In this technologically-driven society, despite its focus on the “immaterial” world of the Internet, individuals maintain a strong obsession with body images. There are certain expectations of body images and of a long life without signs of aging. In relation to this, Hershman Leeson’s 2005 work *ReConstructing Roberta* deals with the representation of the surgically-altered body, reimagining an older Roberta with notable signs of aging. Drawings made by actual plastic surgeons are superimposed on Roberta’s face, suggesting various “improvements” and surgical operations to hide the signs of physical aging and deterioration of the body: Botox injections, cuts, lifts, liposuction, rejuvenation, etc. The medical field thus enters the world of identity-construction so that we no longer depend on masks and costumes; instead, we can surgically alter our skin and modify our physical appearance and our identity altogether: we ‘turn to plastic surgery and genetic engineering.’³⁴ Hershman Leeson is thereby ‘showing the technological properties of the cyborg body through a medical, even surgical (copy-cut-paste), lens.’³⁵ Through this work, Hershman Leeson continues to mirror society, the way women’s bodies are envisioned and reconstructed through images of youth and slimness, images that can now be achieved with the help of plastic surgery in a world that hides female aging.

As can be seen, Hershman Leeson represents the way technology affects our lives in both positive and negative ways. Nowadays technological devices permeate our lives in a way that is not comparable to the 1970s and 1980s, since we are now

³¹ Hershman Leeson. Romancing the Anti-body. In Weibel, *Lynn Hershman Leeson. Civic Radar*, 367.

³² Zylinska. *The Cyborg Experiments*, 8.

³³ Poster, M. (2002). High-Tech Frankenstein, or Heidegger Meets Stelarc. In J. Zylinska, *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age* (pp. 15-32). London; New York: continuum, 16.

³⁴ Weibel. *The Work of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, 46.

³⁵ Giannachi, G. (2016). Copy, Cut, Paste – Humans (Re-)Printed: Lynn Hershman Leeson’s *The Infinity Engine* (2014–). In G. Bouchard and A. Mermikides (Eds.), *Performance and the Medical Body* (pp. 205-223). London: Methuen, 206.

constantly connected to our smartphones and interlinked via the web. Therefore, Hershman Leeson's oeuvre can be reinterpreted and revalued according to today's context. In her more recent work, she takes into account medico-technological innovations. In *The Infinity Engine* (2010-2014), she examines contemporary biotechnologies that create transgenic organisms, use skin cells and 3D bioprinting for skin regeneration and medical procedures that can even manipulate cells so that the construction of the internal and external body is seen as a laboratory construction. In this work, Hershman Leeson is aware of the fact that genetics and even gene editing have become vital to the understanding of contemporary identity. In this world of bioengineering, the distance from nature that Haraway celebrates is no longer liberatory; instead, it has become a requirement, a method of (self-)surveillance and control through pharmaceutical and medical industries, mass media, genetic manipulation, and so on. It has led to an obligatory invasion of the body down to its tiniest particle. In turn, medical knowledge has notably improved.

Overall, regarding Hershman Leeson's work, I believe the main question is not whether technology is emancipatory or restrictive. As has been proven throughout its history and throughout Hershman Leeson's oeuvre, technology, producer of many improvements and wealth, is not devoid of censorship and inequalities; instead, technology creates different forms of racism, of silencing, controlling and excluding. Pinpointing these forms of restriction and manipulation is the first step towards arriving at a potentially emancipatory world. I believe her work is a constant work-in-progress that raises a myriad of questions obsessively revolving around certain themes: identity, gender and technology.

3. The Surgically-Altered Body

In present times, the increasing use of surgical practices in different contexts and for different purposes leads to the full reconsideration of the body, the self and identity. To submit one's body to a surgical operation involves psychological as well as physical changes. It means to put one's trust in the medical establishment, in the hands of the god-like surgeon, and in the medical drugs that might render you unconscious, surrendering yourself to an artificial sleep from which you might not wake up. Surgery patients are offered a sweet, peaceful and temporary death, a blackout or, in some cases, localised numbness, after which there is (potential) rebirth, rebirth in a different body.

In her book *The Argonauts* (2015), Maggie Nelson establishes this connection between life and death when she describes her partner's sex reassignment surgery and the process of her giving birth. Labour was to her a ripping of her body, a touching-death experience, a shattering of her self, '*falling forever, falling to pieces,*' a grotesque alteration of her body and her organs through which she experienced an ephemeral death and ultimately gave birth to her child³⁶. This coincides with Julia Kristeva's description of labour as 'the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty.'³⁷ These descriptions could well be referring to any surgical operation,

³⁶ Nelson, M. (2015). *The Argonauts*. London: Melville House UK, 135.

³⁷ Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. (L.S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 155 (original in French, 1980).

which consists in re-piecing a body, its organs and its flesh, an experience that is also proximate to death. After these physical processes that mutate the original body, regardless of whether it is labour or any surgical intervention, there is an awakening, a change: the creation of a new body/identity. When one wakes up after a surgical procedure or when the anaesthesia ceases to work, there is pain, the following recovery process, the effects of the post-operative drugs, the possible side-effects and potential adaptation.

In regard to plastic surgery, this techno-medical procedure has become part of our daily lives in a way that has brought into reconsideration notions of gender, identity, beauty and illness. It is important to distinguish between elective cosmetic surgery (facelifts, breast reductions/augmentations, “rhinoplasties” or nose jobs, liposuctions or eyelid surgeries) and those surgical interventions for regenerative or health-related reasons³⁸. In both cases, technology and science help create a new technobody which can be costly/conformist/oppressed or subversive/fluid/liberatory.

These surgical procedures could potentially support the production of an alternative understanding of the body and self. Instead, they have been generally used to reinforce and artificially construct sexual difference/dimorphism with the help of pharmacological, advertising and new media industries, and to standardise a global image of Western canonised beauty³⁹. Therefore, instead of enabling the rise of multiplicitous, heterogeneous and non-binary identities, these institutions create a homogenous image of “perfection,” youth and beauty that many suffer and pay to (literally) embody. In this way, the information era has experienced a growing use of elective cosmetic surgery, which is primarily targeted at women, who ‘represent between 60 and 70 percent of all cosmetic surgery patients.’⁴⁰ Their bodies become commodified and technologized, thus revealing their ‘choice of the apparent over the real’, as ‘youthful appearance triumphs over aged reality.’⁴¹

In today’s scientific environment, we have come to understand our body as an artefact, as a group of cells, genes, chromosomes, molecules and genomes that can be artificially transformed, reprogrammed, reproduced and rearranged, improved through technological, pharmacological and medical means. Nowadays, in Kathryn Pauly Morgan’s words, ‘genetics, human sexuality, reproductive outcome, and death [...] are seen by biotechnologists as domains of creation and control,’ achieved through artificial reproduction, genetic engineering, plastic surgery, erectile dysfunction remedies, factory-made testosterone and oestrogen, the Pill, etc⁴². This control over the different aspects of life can be traced back to Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. According to him, ‘a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.’⁴³ This “docile body” acquires a new meaning in present times due to the development of biotechnology and the Internet. It involves not only the control and management of life, but also the power exerted ‘over a technoliving and connected whole.’⁴⁴ Therefore, in this era, all aspects of human life have ‘become the

³⁸ Morgan, K. P. (1991). Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women’s Bodies. *Hypatia*, 6(3), 25-53, 38. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00254.x>

³⁹ Preciado. *Testo Junkie*, 105.

⁴⁰ Morgan. Women and the Knife, 30.

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*, 28.

⁴² *Ibidem.*, 31.

⁴³ Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 136.

⁴⁴ Preciado. *Testo Junkie*, 43-4.

object of technical and artistic intervention.⁷⁴⁵ This ubiquitous and globalised control permeates intimate and private spheres of life, including reproduction, sex, sexuality and genetics; it becomes completely internalised.

Paul B. Preciado calls this present era the “pharmacopornographic” era. According to Preciado, the (bio)power of this era resides in the fact that it ‘does not produce things. It produces mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions, and conditions of the soul [affects].’⁷⁴⁶ Today, technology, science and the Internet control the global population using different surveillance methods (genetic profiling, electronic surveillance, social media, consumer data-gathering, etc.), discreetly permeating the daily lives of individuals. In this way, the medico-technological industry, linked with new media, advertising and communications industries, plays an important role in the production and control of gender, identity and sexuality.

This contextualisation of the contemporary techno-medical environment is necessary to understand what it means to submit one’s body to the knife. Taking into consideration this wider context, I analyse artists’ response to this, particularly ORLAN’s 1993 work *Omnipresence*, and their use of plastic surgery as a form of altering bodies and creating new malleable, fluid identities and transsexual bodies.

Omnipresence is one of a series of surgical performances called *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* by the French artist ORLAN. In this performance/operation, she surgically alters her body combining pre-fixed female features of canonical Western Old Master paintings made by male artists: the mouth of François Boucher’s *Europa*, the forehead of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, the chin of Sandro Botticelli’s *Venus* and the eyes of Jean-Léon Gerome’s *Psyche*, all of which follow the rhetoric of beauty. By reconstructing her face based on this amalgamation of different stereotyped features, the following questions arise: is her work conformist or subversive? Is she constructing yet another female image based on Western patriarchal desires, surrendering to the male gaze? Or is she depicting an identity-in-process of her own choice, thus representing the liberatory potential of plastic surgery? Is it a monstrous and grotesque parody of “feminine beauty”?

In *Omnipresence*, ORLAN highlights the processual quality of the work, including the pre-operative and the post-operative recovery stages. She foregrounds the operating process, the opening of her body. We see the medical tools cutting her face open, digging into her skin to modify her facial features. In this way, she represents the self as an identity-in-process, identity as ‘an open-ended project.’⁷⁴⁷ Her body/self is a metamorphosis, a constant becoming, contributing to the posthuman and postmodern understanding of the self, as opposed to modernism’s fixation with the perfectly-finished and delimited self/work⁷⁴⁸. Before the operation, she constructed a series of computer photographs of her face which merged her features with one of the selected features of the five mythic women, digitally sculpting her flesh to construct a new physiognomy. This series of self-portraits is called *Self-Hybridisation: In Between Two* (1994), emphasising this changing process, the in-betweenness of the self. After the operation, she took pictures of herself every morning for 41 days. Contrary to the “before and after” advertisements offered by medical companies,

⁷⁴⁵ Groys, B. (2008). *Art Power*. Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 54.

⁷⁴⁶ Preciado. *Testo Junkie*, 35-6.

⁷⁴⁷ Ince, K. (2000). *Orlan. Millennial Female*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 111.

⁷⁴⁸ Auslander, P. in J. O’Byrne (1997). Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation. *Art Journal*, 56(4), 50-56, 54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/777720>

which depict the final, perfect end-product, ORLAN documents through photographs the painful and grotesque recovery process, showing her blackened eyes, her puffed swollen face with bruises and scars.

Through this work, ORLAN questions the subject/object, inside/outside, mind/body, private/public dichotomies. No longer are they opposed dualisms; rather, they become intertwined in her operating theatre. ORLAN is presented as both subject and object. Due to the use of local anaesthesia, she becomes the active director of the operating theatre, as opposed to the traditional notion of the passive patient awaiting the action of the traditionally-male surgeon. However, she is also presented as an object, as an artefact which can be modified at will, and as the object of the public's gaze, since the performance was broadcast live in many cities around the world.

Regarding the inside/outside dualism, throughout the surgery, skin is not presented as the border of the body, since it becomes detachable and penetrable. The limits between inside and outside are thus blurred. We notice that the face, protagonist of a myriad of self-portraits, is also *detachable*⁴⁹. Through the operation, the permeable face becomes a source of uncanniness, of abjection. Both Sigmund Freud's notion of *das Unheimliche* and Kristeva's more violent theory on abjection can be related to ORLAN's distorted face. Freud defines the uncanny as 'nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it, [...] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.'⁵⁰ Based on Freud's definition, ORLAN's pre-operative face can be understood as the familiar and old-established, the original and the natural, and her face during the operation is what should have "remained hidden," a source of grotesque uncanniness, repulsion and rejection.

Through Kristeva's understanding of the abject, we go one step further, analysing the bodily fluids that are revealed and expelled through the cutting of ORLAN's skin, creating a wound, an orifice, a hole. This opening of the body is the moment 'when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain.'⁵¹ Instead of showing her body as a fetish, it is turned into a body one has to look away from, a monstrous, leaking and disgusting body. By undergoing plastic surgery and representing the malleability of the body, *Omnipresence* creates, to use Kristeva's words, an identity that is 'double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.'⁵² Another source of abjection in this work are the so-called relics of the operation: the blood-splattered robe that the surgeon wore, gauzes and cloths with blood stains, dead skin, etc. These elements, all waste products from the performance/operation, a recompilation of bodily fluids and flesh accompanied by the revolting stench they produce, are representations of abjection, excretions of the female body that confuse the boundaries between inside and outside.

This dismemberment of the female body, the representation of monstrosity, disease and repulsion can be related to Jo Spence's work and her depiction of the disabled and carcinogenic body. Spence's photographic work represents her breast

⁴⁹ Adams, P. (1996). *The Emptiness of the Image. Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences*. London; New York: Routledge, 143.

⁵⁰ Freud, S. (1976). The Uncanny. (J. Strachey, Trans.). *New Literary History*, 7(3), 619-645, 634 (original in German, 1919). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/468561>

⁵¹ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*, 141.

⁵² *Ibidem.*, 207.

cancer treatment, her body before and after the lumpectomy operation and the coming-to-terms with her new self. She shows images of ‘repugnance, disgust, abjection [...] a monster, a tumor, a cancer.’⁵³ Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1982, and she decided to document her illness and her treatment, questioning the medical gaze. She named this project *The Picture of Health?* (1982-86) and created a work called *Putting Myself in the Picture. A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography* (1986) that dealt with the initial traumatic encounter with the disease, thereby putting not only herself in the picture, but also illness, trauma and deformity.⁵⁴ In Spence’s case, phototherapy was part of her recovery process, part of her “rebirth” and “resurrection” after the lumpectomy operation.

In today’s society, there is a general obsession with the image of a healthy and fit body, an obsession with, to use Baudrillard’s words, ‘an ephemeral, hygienic, promotional radiance of the body [...] which turns sickness into failure.’⁵⁵ In Spence’s own words, this situates ‘beauty culture and “fitness” at one end of a spectrum, and tiredness, aging, illness, drugging, mutilation and death at the other.’⁵⁶ Disease and deformity become conditions of otherness, so they are both erased and hidden from society through plastic surgery, breast reconstruction, prosthesis, etc. In contrast with this tendency to hide these “monstrous” bodies, Spence represents her body-in-crisis, her sick and aging female body ‘with its simultaneous lack (partial removal of the breast) and excess (fat).’⁵⁷ Ultimately, phototherapy became for Spence a way to express the transformative quality of her body, questioning fixed stereotypes and embracing the image of the split self⁵⁸. This is how she came to terms with her changing body and realised that it was not composed of ‘photographic paper, nor was it an image, or an idea, or a psychic structure... it was made of blood, bones and tissue.’⁵⁹

This brings us back to ORLAN’s *Omnipresence*, which also reveals our body composition. At the beginning of her operation, we discover that ‘there is nothing beneath the mask,’ the face, only cells, molecules, pus, blood and other bodily fluids⁶⁰. According to Parveen Adams, in this way, ORLAN reveals the “emptiness of the image,” erasing ‘the difference between being born and being made,’ eliminating the limits between nature and artifice⁶¹. Throughout the operation, we observe how ORLAN is being ‘remade, reborn, as the image of an image,’ ‘an appearance without essence,’ an image without original, a copy of a copy, a remix, a collage⁶². This establishes a strong link between her work and the theories of two contemporary thinkers: Jean Baudrillard and Nicolas Bourriaud. Despite their focus on immateriality, which contrasts with the bodilyness of ORLAN’s work, their theoretical work proves insightful when analysing *Omnipresence*. In this

⁵³ *Ibidem.*, 11.

⁵⁴ Wilson, S. (2015). *Art Labor, Sex Politics. Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 195.

⁵⁵ Baudrillard, J. (2002). *Screened Out*. (C. Turner, Trans.) London; New York: Verso, 11 (original in French, 1997).

⁵⁶ Spence, J. (1995). *Cultural Sniping. The Art of Transgression*. London; New York: Routledge, 139.

⁵⁷ Meskimmon, M. (1996). The Monstrous and the Grotesque. *make*, 72, 6-11, 8.

⁵⁸ Spence, J. (1986). *Putting Myself in the Picture. A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*. London: Camden Press, 184.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*, 151.

⁶⁰ Adams. *The Emptiness of the Image*, 159.

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*, 144.

⁶² *Ibidem.*, 145 and 158.

copy-paste culture of hyperreality, where re-appropriating, remixing, recycling, reproducing, regenerating and reconstructing are common actions, the body unavoidably becomes part of this simulacral culture. ORLAN recycles pre-existing artworks/readymades that acquire a new meaning within her body. This process of re-appropriation is what Bourriaud's writings on the concept of postproduction refer to. According to him, these creative techniques contribute to the 'eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work;' it is a matter of working 'with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market.'⁶³ In my view, ORLAN's performance is part of this recycling culture which adopts and reuses images that were previously circulating around the world. This copy-paste culture is linked to what Baudrillard calls the era of transparency, 'the era of the liquidation of the Real and the Referential.'⁶⁴ To him, this era erases 'the face and the body – run to earth by plastic surgery.'⁶⁵ This elimination process of the "real/original" can be seen in ORLAN's operation as she undergoes plastic surgery, erasing any trace of her biological/original makers. According to the artist herself, her 'work is a struggle against the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, Nature, DNA [...], and God!'⁶⁶ Her body thus turns into a simulation.

Another important aspect of *Omnipresence* is, as its own title indicates, its ubiquity. The surgical operation took place in New York and was broadcast live in various cities around the world: Tokyo, Toronto and Paris. Thus, the private was made public. ORLAN performed the private, what Nelson calls '*The Performance of Intimacy*.'⁶⁷ Her body became mediatised, televised. It became an object and subject of interaction, both in the operating room and in the galleries world-wide where the performance was broadcast. In Jones's words,

Enacting herself (and literally rearranging her body/self) through technologies of representation as well as medical technology, ORLAN produces herself as post-human: her body/self is experienced (both by herself and by her audience) in and through technology⁶⁸.

Ultimately, ORLAN's body becomes a Text, according to Roland Barthes's understanding of it: '[it] is experienced only in an activity, in a production' and it 'solicits from the reader [spectator/audience] a practical collaboration.'⁶⁹ Moreover, Barthes declares that 'the Text [...] is read without the Father's inscription,' returning yet again to the notion of the copy without original, the "Death of the Author,"

⁶³ Bourriaud, N. (2005). *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. (J. Herman, Trans.). New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 13 (original in French, 2002).

⁶⁴ Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The Perfect Crime*. (C. Turner, Trans.). London; New York: Verso, 109-110 (original in French, 1995).

⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*, 109-110.

⁶⁶ ORLAN in O'Bryan. Saint Orlan, 54.

⁶⁷ Nelson. *The Argonauts*, 75. Also see: Hirschhorn, M. (1996). Orlan: Artist in the Post-Human Age of Mechanical Reincarnation: Body as Ready (to be re-) Made. In G. Pollock, *Generations and geographies in the visual arts: feminist readings* (pp. 110-134). London; New York: Routledge, 117.

⁶⁸ Jones, A. (1998). *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 227.

⁶⁹ Barthes, R. (1986). From Work to Text. In R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (pp. 56-64). (R. Howard, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang, 58 and 63 (original in French, 1984).

the elimination and destruction of the *given*⁷⁰. Therefore, ORLAN's body can be read as a Text, an experimental process that is independent of any biological creator/author. For who is ORLAN's creator: herself, her parents, her socio-political context, her surgeon, none, or all? And who is the author of her performance/operation: ORLAN, the scientists, the surgeon, the audience members, the authors of the texts she reads, the designers, or the translators? Overall, identity is an ongoing construction, a Text that exists and comes to being through extensive collaborations.

Barthes also describes the Text as "passage," a traversal, plural and continuous metamorphosis⁷¹. Pointing to a similar meaning, *Passage* (2004) was the title chosen by Jenny Saville for one of her works, which carnally and pictorially represents a naked transsexual and hybrid body, a new anatomy that presents female and male physical traits, remaining in between genders. The bodies Saville represents in her work are also Texts. Saville constructs paintings that depict identities and bodies that have been or will be surgically transformed, such as images of obese bodies about to be surgically altered, or the image of the transsexual body. According to Saville, painting allows her to 'go right through a body, go right through genitals, one gender changes to another,' *passaging*, in Barthes's sense⁷². Limits between male and female, human and machine collapse with the emergence of the figure of the cyborg and the transsexual in contemporary culture. However, one must be aware of the fact that transsexuals are also subject to binary gender stereotypes and can even reinforce them, since medical authorities ask 'male-to-female transsexuals to wear the high heels, skirts, and cosmetics [...], and female-to-males to display the most conventional dress codes and behaviours associated with being a real man.'⁷³ This is what Sandy Stone calls "passing," that is, 'to be accepted as a "natural" member of' the gender of choice; 'passing means the denial of mixture;' it forecloses 'the *inter-textual* possibilities of the transsexual body.'⁷⁴ In spite of these efforts to construct a proper binary system, there is no "real" femininity nor "true" masculinity, and 'transsexuals are transsexuals before and after the long chemical treatments and surgical procedures.'⁷⁵ Only if we accept this might we be able to reach this utopian ideal of the genderless, plural and fluid subject, which implies that there will no longer be only one "right" body 'per gendered subject.'⁷⁶ Baudrillard's affirmation that 'we are all transsexuals' in this era of transparency where 'plastic surgery becomes universal' may be accepted once we deconstruct sexual dimorphism⁷⁷.

Despite the difference between the work of ORLAN, Spence and Saville, they all attempt to represent plurality in different ways. Spence brings the sick, deformed, permeable and aging female body to the picture and Saville depicts the polyvocal transsexual body. Concerning ORLAN's *Omnipresence*, plurality is explored

⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*, 61. Also see: Barthes, R. (2006). *The Death of the Author*. (S. Heath, Trans.). In C. Bishop (Ed.), *Participation* (pp. 41-45). London: Whitechapel (original in French, 1968).

⁷¹ Barthes. *From Work to Text*, 59.

⁷² Saville, J. in E. Saner (2016). Jenny Saville: 'I used to be anti-beauty.' *The Guardian*, in <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/25/jenny-saville-painter-artist-gagosian-gallery-london-interview-charles-saatchi-yba> [25 February 2018]

⁷³ Plant. *Zeros + Ones*, 211.

⁷⁴ Stone, S. (2003). A Posttranssexual Manifesto. In A. Jones (Ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (pp. 187-191). London; New York: Routledge, 189.

⁷⁵ Plant. *Zeros + Ones*, 212.

⁷⁶ Stone. A Posttranssexual Manifesto, 189.

⁷⁷ Baudrillard. *Screened Out*, 10 and 56.

through the amalgamation of the fragments of different mythic women and the processual and dynamic quality of the work, the focus of which is on change and malleability. Although her starting point is, ironically, the patriarchal stereotypical female image, the outcome seems a grotesque parody of artificial beauty, an upside-down carnivalesque version of traditional cosmetic surgery. Even if narcissistic and exhibitionistic, ORLAN shows her journey through pain, deformation, repulsion and the ugly, usually hidden stages of recovery. It is a journey that is inconclusive, an ongoing process of the construction of the self which coincides with Haraway's understanding of a cyborgian world in which irony is a 'rhetorical strategy and a political method,' a world which deconstructs boundaries and considers 'the partial, fluid aspect' of identity⁷⁸.

4. Online Identity Performance

In contrast with the focus on the physical body in the previous section, this section analyses the virtual configurations of identity within the Internet. However, this contrast does not imply an opposition, since embodiment also plays an important role in the Net. As Katherine Hayles suggested, 'in the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism.'⁷⁹ It is a space where the virtual and the physical merge in an infinite web of connections, complementing each other. A virtual avatar would not exist without the pressing of the fingertips on the keyboard or the bodily interaction with the computer screen. In some cases, there is even a reflection of the physical traits of the person behind the computer screen onto the online avatar. Even when there is no visual equivalence between the "real" person and its avatar(s), the cyberworld constantly reflects the actual world, its politics, its citizens and its culture.

Technological objects like the computer, the laptop or the smartphone have nowadays become what Sherry Turkle calls 'evocative objects,' objects 'that provoke self-reflection.'⁸⁰ We project ourselves onto these objects, which become 'objects-to-think-with' for thinking about oneself, 'more like thought-prosthetics than simple tools.'⁸¹ Through these objects, combined with the Internet, we not only reflect on our identity in terms of our personality, our emotions and even our sexuality, but we also create our social environment. Computers offer a myriad of possibilities that expand the physical world and at times even transcend it, leaving behind its limitations. Through these apparatuses, we construct ourselves through processes of archiving, surfing, texting, designing, browsing, posting, sharing and interacting with other virtual selves. Within the Internet, we are able to explore our multiple selves. As Turkle declared, 'the Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity.'⁸² In this way, we become

⁷⁸ Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 178.

⁷⁹ Hayles, K. (2008). *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 3.

⁸⁰ Turkle, S. (2005). *The Second Self. Computers and the Human Spirit*. London; Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2.

⁸¹ *Ibidem.*, 3.

⁸² Turkle. *Life on the Screen*, 178.

mediated and pixelated beings composed of bits that travel across mediated worlds, across shifting networks. We are permanently plugged-in beings, ever traversing the real and virtual worlds.

Without negating the potentiality of identity construction within the Internet, we must take into account the manipulative and controlling discourses that underlie this cyberworld, this virtual Pangea. Identity fluidity has been highlighted as one of the most important qualities of cyberspace, allowing a free exploration and construction of one or many identities, even gender swapping in a way that is not possible in the actual world, despite the techno-medical advances of our times. Within cyberspace, identity fluidity can take many alternative and transgressive forms, but identity can also be presented as something restrictive, consumable, even tending to homogenisation due to globalisation forces. Without attempting to analyse all the different forms of self-construction in computational technologies, I resort to the following artistic example that represents projections of identities in cyberspace: Francesca da Rimini's *Dollspace* (1997-2001).

Dollspace, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/>, is an online hypertextual artwork/website where da Rimini presents her virtual avatar, doll yoko, who mirrors the sexual desires and fantasies of another net identity, GashGirl, so that both identities converge, making it difficult to distinguish one from another⁸³. At one point in this hypertextual narrative, a character named Francesca, after the artist herself, exchanges e-mail correspondence with doll yoko, narrowing the boundaries between self and other, virtual and actual self. *Dollspace* provides a space where we discover doll yoko's personality and life story by immersing ourselves in an electronic ghost fiction, a complex website through which the users can browse through uncanny images, private e-mails, audio files, and texts, thus constructing this online identity. This Gothic narrative starts with the death of doll yoko, drowned in a swamp where other Japanese girls have also encountered their death. By constructing this labyrinthine website, da Rimini gives voice to the silenced voices of Japanese girls and makes their otherwise hidden stories of femicide, rape, child abuse, violence and incest visible. In the first stages of this narrative, we encounter the image of a closed eyelid, perhaps indicating that by continuing this narrative, unknown truths will be revealed, and the invisible thus made visible. In this web of personal e-mails, auto-references, violent and disturbing images, erotic bodies, and drugs, da Rimini alludes to the viral dissemination of pornographic and violent images through mass media as well as to that which is silenced and hidden. She presents the Internet as a democratising space where anyone can contribute, where any story can be told and reach world-wide audiences, and where multiple identities can be explored, but also as a space permeated by pornography and advertising industries and by gender/racial inequalities.

In addition, da Rimini explores another aspect inherent to cyberspace: its collaborative essence. *Dollspace* is a collaborative, multidisciplinary and polyvocal work in which the Mexican pioneer of "hacktivism," Ricardo Domínguez, the new media artist Shu Lea Cheang and the composer Michael Grimm participated⁸⁴. Consequently, doll yoko is also a collaborative construction composed of Grimm's cyberpunk

⁸³ Volkart, Y. (2004). Unruly Bodies. The Effect Body As a Place of Resistance. *Media Art Net*, in http://www.mediaartnet.org/themes/cyborg_bodies/unruly_bodies/print/ [25 February 2018]

⁸⁴ Zalbidea Paniagua, M. (2011). Towards a Multimodal Analysis of da Rimini's *Dollspace*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13(3), 1-9, 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1799>

soundtrack, Lea Cheang's 'erotic, porn, and gore Asian graphics' and da Rimini's e-mail correspondence and poems⁸⁵. Ultimately, it is through the user's interaction with doll yoko that she becomes alive, that her story comes to light. This is what happens within cyberspace, a place where you can post texts, images or audios so that they have the potentiality of reaching the whole world, but also a place where there always exists the uncertainty of whether they will be read/seen/listened to or not, and thus remain lost in the infinite web of information. In this case, da Rimini's online artwork managed to reach various parts of the world, so that it transcended the limitations of physical space. Susan Hawthorne calls the World Wide Web 'a *no place* that exists all across the globe' [my italics]⁸⁶. In this sense, *Dollspace* is also a no place, present both everywhere and nowhere, an interface situated between the virtual and the physical and between many actual places; for instance, there are many references to Russian, Mexican, American and Japanese countries and cultures, thus creating a spatial connection with the "real" world, but remaining within the imaginary/virtual space of the Internet.

Moreover, *Dollspace* inherits some of the ideas of the cyberfeminist art group da Rimini was part of called VNS Matrix (founded in 1991 and dissolved in 1997), formed by four artists: da Rimini, Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, and Virginia Barratt. VNS Matrix created the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991), which was printed on posters, distributed as postcards and published online. VNS Matrix supported women's participation in Internet art projects and 'their main goals were to dismantle the dominant discourse, [...] to denounce gender violence,' which is what da Rimini accomplished through her work *Dollspace*⁸⁷. In the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto*, this group supported cyberspace as 'a site for the construction of libidinal pleasures, [...] a feminised and feminist erotics of technocultural production and politics.'⁸⁸ They referenced Kristeva's notion of the abject through images of slime, cunts and bodily secretions, and installed 'a vocabulary loaded with female sexual imagery,' a vocabulary that da Rimini's highly pornographic work *Dollspace* inherits⁸⁹. Through images of sadomasochism, death, drug use, children with weapons, pornography and young sexualised Asian women, da Rimini denounces violence and sex exploitation, in particular of women and children. As can be seen, both works, the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto* and *Dollspace*, focus on the body, the sexualised body, considering it an important site for feminists. They provocatively address virtual conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Another aspect that *Dollspace* inherits from the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto* is the stream-of-consciousness writing, a fragmented narrative through which we enter doll yoko's mind and thoughts. As the mind's thread of thought, *Dollspace* is 'non-linear and open-ended.'⁹⁰ It is a labyrinthine space that you schizophrenically explore, moving in circles and reaching dead-ends, misled by repetitious phrases and images. Even if you try to reach a conclusion, read every single

⁸⁵ *Ibidem.*, 2.

⁸⁶ Hawthorne, S. (2001). Wild Bodies/Technobodies. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 29(3-4), 54-70, 55.

⁸⁷ Zalbidea Paniagua. Towards a Multimodal Analysis, 2.

⁸⁸ VNS Matrix (1991). *The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, in <https://vnsmatrix.net/the-cyberfeminist-manifesto-for-the-21st-century/#next> [25 February 2018]

⁸⁹ Kuni, V. (2007). Cyborg – Communication – Code – Infection. *Third Text*, 21(5), 649-659, 656. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820701600178>

⁹⁰ Zalbidea Paniagua. Towards a Multimodal Analysis, 2.

page/web, it always feels inconclusive and there is always something you leave behind, something that escapes your notice and remains in the dark. This is what Plant calls ‘a patchwork culture of short-term memories and missing records, conflicting histories and discontinuous samples.’⁹¹ Within this disturbing narrative, one notices the importance of texts, words and thoughts when constructing an online narrative or identity. As Haraway stated, ‘writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs.’⁹² Online identities are mostly constructed by and through language, as well as through technology. In Sean Cubitt’s words, ‘this masquerade is entirely textual. And to this newly textualized self, the whole of the world appears as text.’⁹³ In *Dollspace*, images and audio files are also part of this identity, and only when we take into account all these different sources do we begin to grasp this online self, ‘who has multiple identities within herself: ’ the revengeful, the killer, the innocent, the aggressive or the sexually aroused doll yoko⁹⁴. Echoing Haraway’s promotion of the use of irony in her cyborg myth, da Rimini makes use of ‘parody, obscene language, and pop icons to promote gender equality in real life, as well as in cyberspace,’ as her way of making a cyberfeminist stand against sexual exploitation and stereotypification of women⁹⁵.

The first word that we encounter in da Rimini’s website is “hauntings,” which immediately transports the user to a phantasmagorical space, ‘a play of illusions and phantasms’⁹⁶. Doll yoko is presented as both dead and alive, a haunting and ghostly presence that the artist Stelarc calls a ‘phantom body,’ a body between two states, between being and not being, the visible and the invisible⁹⁷. This ghost, doll yoko, arises from a traumatic history of murder, rape and femicide as a vision, a “digital apparition,” to use Vilém Flusser’s term⁹⁸. According to this philosopher, ‘either the alternative worlds are as real as the given one, or the given reality is as ghostly as the alternative ones.’⁹⁹ This can be linked to Baudrillard’s theories of the simulacra. To him, there is no real: ‘no more mirror of being and appearances.’¹⁰⁰ In the digital sphere, ‘simulation replaces reality,’ the real becomes extinct, so everything (avatar, double, self, user) is a replica, a performance, a simulacrum, a copy, a ghost¹⁰¹. This is what is most interesting about this Japanese ghost character: that she is ‘not a natural born woman, but a posthuman copy/essence, evolving from the dark abysses of patriarchal capitalism,’ depicting the simulacrum of identity in the digital era¹⁰². This idea takes form in the infinitely reproduced images of the doll throughout the web, where

⁹¹ Plant. *Zeros + Ones*, 136.

⁹² Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 176.

⁹³ Cubitt, S. (1998). *Digital Aesthetics*. London: SAGE Publications, 18.

⁹⁴ Zalbidea Paniagua. *Towards a Multimodal Analysis*, 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem.*, 2.

⁹⁶ Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 12.

⁹⁷ Stelarc in Zylinska. *The Cyborg Experiments*, 144.

⁹⁸ Flusser, V. (1996). *Digital Apparition*. In T. Druckrey (Ed.), *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation* (pp. 242-246). New York: Aperture, 242.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem.*, 242.

¹⁰⁰ Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

¹⁰¹ Langdon, M. (2014). *The Work of Art in a Digital Age. Art, Technology and Globalisation*. New York: Springer, 65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-1270-4>

¹⁰² Volkart. *Unruly Bodies*.

‘da Rimini echoes Warhol’s example of simulacra with pictures of geishas.’¹⁰³ The female images are presented as commodities, as dolls, as infinitely reproducible objects/copies.

The choice of the figure of the doll as the protagonist of this online project and as the online projection of da Rimini’s self is worth analysing. The doll, apart from being a consumable female-gendered object, also represents an in-between space, between the natural and the artificial: it is a dead-like creature, an object with uncanny human similarities, a ‘pretty corpse.’¹⁰⁴ It is a miniature replica of a female being, what Marina Warner defines as a ‘sleeping beauty’ who ‘looks alive’ and ‘real.’¹⁰⁵ The fact that this doll is presented online, with her own “voice” and a particular written language associated with her, highlights this tension between the real and the virtual, life and death, the human and the artificial that we previously saw in Herschman Leeson’s telerobotic doll *CybeRoberta*. Both artworks present ‘a space where dolls become human, where reality and fiction intermingle, where word becomes flesh.’¹⁰⁶

In this world of excesses, lust and pornography, we encounter both fantastical and real creatures that compose doll yoko’s multiplicitous and transgressive environment: a transgendered wolf, zombies, indigenous and Zapatista women, anime and manga characters, petite girls, Teletubbies, goblins, voodoo dolls, etc.¹⁰⁷ Doll yoko herself states, ‘I spent many years pretending to be normal, morphing names, costumes, masks as the situation required.’¹⁰⁸ But in this web project she finds the freedom to explore new environments and new multiple selves; she is ‘always becoming,’ she is a flow of data, a being that is simultaneously ‘everything and nothing.’¹⁰⁹ Nothingness is translated in this website as “deep dollspace zero,” a space where zero (identified with the woman, the hole, the emptiness, the negative, the Other) ‘swallows one’ (identified with the man, the positive, the wholeness), a space where ‘one becomes three,’ multiple¹¹⁰. This could be traced back to Plant’s theories, in which she contrasts ‘1, the definite, upright line; and 0, the diagram of nothing at all: penis and vagina, thing, and hole.’¹¹¹ In da Rimini’s *Dollspace*, this dichotomy is turned into multiple becomings which can be ‘male, female, hermaphrodite, transsexual, transgendered, undecided, ambiguous, ambivalent.’¹¹²

Ultimately, in works like *Dollspace*, cyberspace is presented as a twofold environment of both fluidity and restriction. Da Rimini explores this vast cyberworld and brings to light the conceptions of the self in contemporary culture, a glimpse into this infinite, ever expanding web of interconnections. She depicts hidden stories of femicide and child abuse and gender stereotypification within the Internet whilst exploring the multiplicity of the online self and its different ways of representation through texts, images, e-mail addresses, interactivity and so on.

¹⁰³ Zalbidea Paniagua. *Towards a Multimodal Analysis*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace*, (1997-2001), <http://dollyoko.thing.net/doll08a.htm> [25 February 2018].

¹⁰⁵ Warner, M. (2012). *On the Threshold: Sleeping Beauties*. In K. Gross (Ed.), *On Dolls* (pp. 108-129). London: Notting Hill Editions, 108.

¹⁰⁶ Zalbidea Paniagua. *Towards a Multimodal Analysis*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ da Rimini, *Dollspace*, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/skinflux0.htm> and <http://dollyoko.thing.net/zap/ramona01.htm> [25 February 2018].

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem.*, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/reddyoko0.htm> [25 February 2018].

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem.*, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/becomin3.htm> [25 February 2018].

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/sno09.htm> [25 February 2018].

¹¹¹ Plant. *Zeros + Ones*, 34-5.

¹¹² da Rimini, *Dollspace*, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/mask05.htm> [25 February 2018].

5. (In)Conclusion

Before ending this analysis of contemporary representations of the self, one must delve into a fundamental social and cultural platform for identity construction in the twenty-first century: social media. Through this virtual platform, cyberspace aspires to create a homogenous global subject, a totally controlled and (self-)surveilled subject. Contemporary culture requires people to constantly post/publish images and videos, sometimes in real time. Here, identity fluidity turns into a restrictive performativity of the self that is required to be constant, homogenous, forever present and publicly exposed. This constant online presence leads to the extreme publicness of the self, to a 'state of semi-permanence.'¹¹³ Accordingly, Melissa Gronlund describes 'identity online as performative in extreme – something created and then energetically maintained for the online public at large.'¹¹⁴ Everything is made public so that the private sphere of the self is slowly erased from existence.

The fact that practically everything is made public also implies that our image, our information, our persona can be appropriated and replicated by anyone and personal ownership is thereby put into question. Our image can become an object of consumption, part of the global market. Hawthorne stated, 'by extending ourselves into cyberspace, we effectively "export" ourselves into the global economy.'¹¹⁵ So the question is: who owns our information, our selves nowadays? What control do we have over our identity? If every "like" we click on Facebook turns into monetary value, if projects like the Human Genome Project or 23andMe intervene upon cells and take part in the datafication of our genetic composition, if we can be traced through our Internet browsing or GPS tracking history, how can we distinguish public from private anymore? For instance, by blindly and automatically accepting the Terms and Conditions, a process we are obliged to undergo in order to be part of social media to not be excluded from one of the main forms of socialising in present times, we accept that our posts/texts/images are no longer our own. If we don't accept these conditions, we remain invisible, cast-outs.

Within social media, we are forced to make constant choices, we are forced to be consumers, constantly bombarded by viral images and advertisements. We cannot *not* choose, we cannot *not* be part of the Internet without undergoing any economic or social consequences. Nowadays, "going online" is no longer a choice or a potentiality, but rather a necessary condition of existence.'¹¹⁶ This situation is paradoxical in extreme. By becoming part of contemporary society, we accept being turned into permanent objects of surveillance and datafication, manipulable and consumable, but, in exchange, we are also able to access and disseminate information online and communicate with each other instantly¹¹⁷. Tim Jordan stated, 'the power and paradox of cyberspace is its ability to liberate and dominate

¹¹³ Gronlund, M. (2014). From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet. *Afterall*, 37(1), 4-13, 8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/679372>

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, 7.

¹¹⁵ Hawthorne. *Wild Bodies/Technobodies*, 56.

¹¹⁶ Grassegger, H. (2016). I Am Capital. Digital Serfs or Masters of Our Data? In I. Gevers, *Hacking Habitat. Art of Control. Art, Technology and Social Change* (pp. 113-121). Utrecht: Niet Normaal Foundation, 115.

¹¹⁷ Ball, K. and F. Webster (2003). *The Intensification of Surveillance. Crime, Terrorism and Warfare in the Information Age*. London; Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 12.

simultaneously.¹¹⁸ We are forced to project ourselves onto the Internet to find a job (LinkedIn), to establish friendships (Facebook, Instagram), to access information (Google), to express ourselves (YouTube, Twitter), etc. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘we have here a discourse that is authoritarian: one has to express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate, and so forth.’¹¹⁹ If not, one becomes excluded.

This aspect of online life must be analysed in any research project that deals with the theme of identity production in the digital era. This era of mass surveillance constructs, monitors and controls its citizens through networking technologies, data collecting, algorithms, targeted filtering, face recognition software, live broadcasts of social media, user profiling, etc. Globalisation forces work to make everything visible and homogenous. According to Mark Dorrian, Google, which has gathered more information about citizens around the globe than any state security agency, ‘emblematises globalisation.’¹²⁰ Google is being used on a daily basis by citizens around the world who freely and wilfully contribute to the creation of a world-wide database containing our information. Nowadays, our symbiotic relationship with technology has turned this online system into ‘our new panopticum.’¹²¹ The Internet has become ‘a Superpanopticon of total surveillance,’ a Foucaultian notion applied to online spaces¹²². Anonymity and anti-censorship are no longer features of this online world. What started as a space potentially free from the limitations and discriminations of “real” life, as an opportunity to play and experiment with new identities, is now also a space where our online data ‘can become like a person’s shadow: hard to fight, impossible to shake.’¹²³ We are unerasable digital beings, constantly surveilled bodies constituted by information.

All in all, both the fear of losing all personal data to cyberhackers and the loss of privacy seem to monopolise concerns about the Here and Now. Consequently, this affects the perception of ourselves in the “real” and the virtual worlds. There is an intimate connection between these two worlds, which have strong effects upon each other, as has been referred to repeatedly throughout this article. We are now technologically-mediated human beings, part of both the virtual and the physical worlds. We have become data-bodies, bodies constructed by and through information. In this sense, we have also become reproducible, modifiable, manipulatable and remixable. Hence, our bodies and identities are now simulacral entities, part of a simulacral digital world of bits, atoms and particles. Using Baudrillard’s words, which have been a constant throughout this study, identities are ‘simulacra of simulation, founded on information.’¹²⁴ This is what the main artists herein analysed,

¹¹⁸ Jordan, T. (1999). *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*. London: Routledge, 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203448632>

¹¹⁹ Lazzarato, M. (1996). *Immaterial Labor*. (P. Colilli and E. Emory, Trans.). In P. Virno and M. Hardy (Eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: a Potential Politics* (pp. 133-147). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 135 (original in Italian, 1996).

¹²⁰ Dorrian, M. (2013). On Google Earth. In M. Dorrian and F. Pousin (Eds.), *Seeing from Above. The Aerial View in Visual Culture* (pp. 290-307). London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 294.

¹²¹ Gevers, I. et al. (2016). *Hacking Habitat. Art of Control. Art, Technology and Social Change*, exh. cat. Utrecht: Normaal Foundation, 8.

¹²² Jordan. *Cyberpower*, 180.

¹²³ Van der Ploeg, I. (2012). Body as data in the age of information. In K. Ball, K. D. Haggerty and D. Lyon (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* (pp. 176-181). London; New York: Routledge, 177-8.

¹²⁴ Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 121.

Hershman Leeson, ORLAN and da Rimini, depict: a plural subject that is constituted through technology, bioengineering, routine performances, remixes, virtual simulations and online data. This shapes identities today, when we dress, when we log onto our computers, when we undergo plastic surgeries or when we sign into Facebook or Instagram. Simultaneously emancipatory and manipulative, whether we like it or not, ‘we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology.’¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 150.