

Disembodied? Identity Construction in a Constructed World

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“Our digital experiences are out-of-body. This biases us toward depersonalized behavior in an environment where one’s identity can be a liability.” Douglas Rushkoff [1]

Pat

Some years ago, I got a very strange e-mail, something in between a spam message and a very intimate message sent to the wrong contact. It was a short cyberpunk tale, with some erotic (though not explicitly sexual) content, where the main characters were “Me” and “You”. It was written in Italian, and the sender nickname was “Pat”. Something in it that made me think it was not just misplaced communication. At the time, I was an avid sci-fi reader, and I was already working as an art critic, with a focus on artistic use of the net. Maybe, somebody who knew about my work was trying to play a role game with me. So, I decided to reply in a way that would keep the communication flow open.

My reply became the starting point of a short but intense exchange between me and Pat. In order to force her to do the same, I decided to play the card of total

transparency, telling her everything about my private and public life. On the other side, Pat decided to play the card of total opacity, hiding her “real” identity behind a literary mask. In some odd way, we were flirting. But it was an affair without a future. While I was obsessed by her real self, she wanted to experiment with identity construction. While I wanted to know who she was and why she was playing this game with me, Pat wanted me to enter her fictional world and contribute to it, completing her stories, giving flesh and blood to her projection of me. While I flattened my online identity onto my boring, grey daily life, Pat was able to build a charming, rich digital persona by hiding everything about herself, to a point that made me unsure of the few things that I thought to know about her: that she was a homely girl doing a boring job in front of a computer.

While researching to write this text, I discovered that I lost everything about Pat. I miss her. Though she was a complete construction, she is still, in my mind, a more real, rich and complex human than most of the people I met in my life.

Gaz

“Avatars... will replace the bathroom mirror and bring down the cosmetics industry.” Gazira Babeli [2]

I'm not alone in saying this. Today, many people out there would probably admit that they never met in person, and they don't know the real name, age and sex of some of the most important people in their life. We live today in a constructed world, in which human relationships have been increasingly mediatized and in which most of our knowledge of reality relies on media. In this environment, it doesn't make sense anymore to distinguish between virtual and real, and between a real person and her digital representation: they are both real, either they choose to be one or two different personas.

According to media theorist Douglas Rushkoff, digital technology is biased toward depersonalization. “Whether sending an email, typing a comment to a blog post, or controlling an avatar in a video game, we are not in the computer, at a discussion, or in the fantasy world with our friends. We are at home or the office, behind a computer terminal or game console. We are operating out of our bodies and free of our identities.” [3] This will probably change soon, thanks to the pursuit of immediacy shared by all communication technologies; but the very concept of “mediation” will prevent this immediacy from being complete.

According to Rushkoff, even if this can have some positive consequences (ie., protecting activists in countries without freedom of speech), we have to resist the medium; and in order “to bring our humanity with us into the digital realm”, we must be ourselves.

Even if we agree with Rushkoff in terms of social behavior, we have to admit that all this provides people with unprecedented possibilities of identity construction and manipulation; and these possibilities prove to be particularly interesting for artists: not just because the old Pigmalion dream, to turn an artifact into a living human, finally seems to come true; but also because, at this level of realism, identity construction turns out to be a wonderful tool to understand the world and to play with prejudices, gender issues and so forth.

Gazira Babeli is a good example of this. Born in Second Life in 2006, Gazira Babeli is the creation of a human who decided to disappear behind the mask she designed for herself. This choice, and her mastery in designing her virtual (read: public) persona, puts you (her audience) in front of a choice: you either have to think about Gazira Babeli as the artwork of a missing artist, or accept Gazira Babeli as a real person, and an artist herself.

If you ascribe to the former, Gazira becomes a bomb undermining your way of thinking about art and gender; forcing us, the viewer - in a Western culture grounded in the cult of the individual and in love with the myth of the artist as genius - to

accept an artwork without a known artist. We may question: is she as she appears through her avatar or, if she is not what she appears through her avatar, who is the person behind Gazira? Who's the puppeteer who moves the puppet: A man or a woman? A teenager or an adult? A heterosexual, or homosexual? A single person, or a group? By denying us any answer, she challenges us by disrupting the link between artist and artwork and denying the viewer the opportunity to interpret the artwork through analysis of the artist. Because in the end, whatever you hypothesise about the artist, the fact is that the human behind the puppet remains invisible; and ultimately, by searching for the person behind the avatar, all you serve to do – as I did with Pat - is deteriorate your working relationship with, and understanding of, the entity/identity that attracted your interest in the first place; the only thing that matters; the avatar.

If, however, you ascribe to the latter - if you accept Gazira Babeli as a real person, and an artist herself - you will first have to update your list of categories of art to include “avatar artist”, and probably discover that these categories don't make so much sense anymore. Then, you will finally have access to the wonderful world of Gazira Babeli, whose focus, no surprise, is exactly on undermining categories, stereotypes, prejudices and common beliefs. What is virtual, and what is real? After all, real life is all about wearing masks... Is there more freedom in simulated environments than in the outer world? “My body can walk barefoot, but my avatar needs Prada shoes...” [4] Is what she does “new media” or a take on the history of art? Most of her works seem to prove the latter is true.

In *Anna Magnani/take2* (2007), for example, Gazira performs, in random order, all the facial expressions available in her archive. As an avatar, she is reminding other avatars that they all live into a simulation. As a real person, she is showing us that we always perform scripted codes, adapting ourselves to the role society has chosen for us. Like Martha Rosler in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Gazira Babeli is both forcing herself into the environment other people designed for her and resisting it.

Princess Belsize Dollar

“What if they really mean it?” Slavoj Zizek [5]

The web has proven to be the perfect environment where to build and perform public personas from its very beginning. Often, “virtual characters” created by artists play with the audience expectations – an audience usually broader and more variegated than the art audience – and adopt affirmative strategies to make their criticism more effective and disruptive. In 1996, the disturbing character of Mouchette emerged through the eponymous website. Mouchette [6] was a teenager artist living in Amsterdam and planning to commit suicide, addressing her audience with sensual close-ups of flowers and bodies, intimate sounds and direct interaction (via forms, forums and web-chats). Later on, the character was claimed by Dutch artist Martin Neddham. More recently, US based artist Ann Hirsch reached 1.8 million YouTube hits in about two years performing Caroline Benton, a college freshman seducing viewers “through dance, song, emo whining and copius ass shaking” on her YouTube account *Scandalishious* (2008 – 2009). *Scandalishious* explored the territory of “voyeurism, loneliness and desire” remixing online exhibitionism with the way women are usually portrayed on reality TV [7]. The work of Helen Carmel Benigson fits perfectly in this tradition. Helen studied art at the Slade School of Fine Art, but if you get in touch with her through her website, her Twitter account or her blog, it would be easy to fall into the sexy, charming trap of her alter ego Princess Belsize Dollar, the rapper who loves Eminem, late night poker and youporn.com. Benigson willingly and knowingly over-identifies herself with a mask of stereotypical femininity, in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish between the person and the avatar, the genuine identification and the parody. Does she really love pink, after all? As in all strategies of over-identification, the strength of Benigson's work lies exactly in the impossibility to answer such a question. According to Slavoj Zizek, while ironic imitation is reassuring, over-identification “bring[s] to light the obscene

superego underside of the system”, thus “suspend[ing] its efficiency”. [8] Like the Slovenian group Laibach, Benigson “does not function as an answer, but as a question”, asking to the viewer: how do you relate with the feminine stereotype I'm playing in your face?

Muzza

“Second Life itself seemed to me to be the ultimate arena of Projection...”

Miri Segal [9]

For both Gazira and Benigson, designing their own body is just the first step into designing the world they live in. Unlike in previous experiments in identity construction – think about Lynn Hershman Leeson and her alter ego Roberta Breitmore – this world does not exist only in representation and documentation, and is not just a private world, because it's shared with other people. We experience it when we visit Locusolus, Gazira's homeplace in Second Life, when we follow Princess Belsize Dollar's Twitter or we attend one of her rap performances.

In 1984, novelist William Gibson described cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination”. In 2007, artist Miri Segal said about Second Life (SL): “Roaming in SL is like wandering inside the collective sub-conscious: when I “speak” with someone there are no nuances of tone or facial expression, I can not raise one brow in irony and so forth. As a result, an amplified interpretation of what is said is occurring – a projection; It is up to me to decide how to understand what happens, and the objective reality barely limits me. Naturally, I bring my own sub-conscious and mood into those interpretations.” [10]

The interest in projections is exactly what brought Segal to set a “documentary” in Second Life. Does the word “documentary” still make sense in a world that is entirely constructed by its inhabitants? In my view, *BRB* (2007) is a documentary not

in the way it documents a “true” story set in a “consensual hallucination”, but in the way it shows the flaws of the hallucination or, if you like, the glitches in the Matrix. These flaws are not emphasized, but they are depicted as a natural element of the reality of Second Life. Muzza, Segal's avatar, wears an unnatural, grey skin; her t-shirt and trousers are landscape images roughly mapped onto her body, and often – not always – she wears a Google search page screenshot on her face. In other words, she does her best to appear abstract – a piece of information instead of a human body.

Along the movie, other details show that she is inhabiting an interface, rather than a world. In Second Life, when somebody “speaks”, his avatar is seen typing. At the philosopher's campfire, she focus on this unnatural gesture, and the mechanical sound accompanying it. When Muzza and her partner move to the public orgies space, Segal opens the in-game browser and types “love” in the search engine. In the closing sex scene between Muzza and Roga, the two women are seen clicking on two “poseballs”, the scripted objects that place your avatar in an animated pose. They start making sex, while the camera moves slowly around and “into” them, showing that they are nothing but a badly designed 3D object.

With *BRB*, Segal takes a short trip into a “projection”, exploring how simulated realities can be convincing despite their flaws, exactly like a dream. The title itself is revelatory. In the online jargon, “BRB” is a shorthand for “be right back”, and is commonly used in chat rooms to let someone know that you are stepping away from the computer, but will return in a quick few minutes. In the context of Segal's work, it might be better read in the other way around: “I'm stepping away from reality, but will return in a quick few minutes.”

In this text, I have focused on four constructed identities. I met some of them (Pat, Gazira) in “person”, some other (Princess Belsize Dollar, Muzza) through art documentation. All of them are abstract, as any construction, and problematize their own abstractedness in their work. But all of them are “real” at a completely new

level: the level in which a construction is real in a constructed world, the one we all live in.

Notes

[1] Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or Be Programmed. Ten Commands for a Digital Age*, OR Books, New York 2010, p. 79.

[2] In Domenico Quaranta (ed.), *Gazira Babeli*, FPEditions, Brescia 2008 [LINK Editions, Brescia 2011], p. 65.

[3] Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or Be Programmed. Ten Commands for a Digital Age*, OR Books, New York 2010, p. 83 – 84.

[4] In Tilman Baumgaertel, ““My body can walk barefoot, but my avatar needs Prada shoes”. Interview with Gazira Babeli”, in *Nettime*, March 23, 2007, online at <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0703/msg00032.html>.

[5] Slavoj Zizek, “Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?”, 1993. Republished in *Maska*, Issue 98-99, Spring 2006, pp. 38 – 41.

[6] Cf. <http://www.mouchette.org/>.

[7] Cf. <http://therealannhirsch.com>.

[8] Slavoj Zizek, “Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?”, quoted, p. 40.

[9] Yael Bergstein, “Second Life, First Love. On the Movie BRB, questions to Miri Segal”, in *Studio*, Issue 169, June – July 2007.

[10] Ibid.