National College of Art and Design

Fine Art Media

The Multitudinous Self:

Expanded Identity in Mouchette and LaTurbo Avedon

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I declare that this thesis is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed:

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Introduction

This thesis will examine two virtual personas: Mouchette and LaTurbo Avedon. Both are artists who have made and exhibited work both on and offline. I will discuss their similarities as well as the ways in which they differ. New technology allows for the expansion of identity; it is possible for each person to develop several personas online, which can greatly differ in appearance and personality from one's 'real-life' self. The ways in which new possibilities of the self are allowing for the exploration of taboo subject matters through the freedom of anonymity online will be examined and I will argue that this development is changing our society and as a result, contemporary art. The democratisation of the Internet and the rise of social media has made standard the practice of presenting variations of our self across several online platforms.

My enquiry in this thesis is limited in part because of the infancy of the Internet as opposed to other art mediums. Internet art has only recently emerged and as a result there is a lack of material written about it in comparison to other art movements. Most of what has been written about it has been published online rather than in print which to some may lack authority or legitimacy. Internet art itself has its own limitations. All artworks are in a way finite, and online artworks are no different. Technological advances can lead to online artworks quickly becoming outdated and therefore inaccessible on newer browser technologies. This is known as "link rot" (Chan, 2012, p.18). Online artwork is also limited by the fact that only two of the five senses can be stimulated by it, though it is not unimaginable that in the not-so-distant future we will be able to smell, touch and taste through computers. Another limitation is that the artist cannot control the size or shape of the screen or the device web-based work will be viewed on. If this is not considered when creating a website it can cause the work to become skewed or even not load at all when viewed on certain devices, but if this is taken into account and the functionality remains then it can enhance the experience of viewing the artwork, comparable to viewing a physical 3D artwork from a variety of angles.

The limitations that exist in online artwork are accompanied by many advantages and new possibilities. Making artwork for the Internet permits the artist to address their audience directly. The work can be viewed all over the world, cutting out an intermediary institutional framework. Work can be made without physical materials, which, as well as being cost efficient, is an advantage in a world overflowing with commodities. Furthermore, the possibility of creating personas online allows artists to create work without it being attributed to their 'real-life' self. The freedom of anonymity online also enables the artist to address difficult and taboo subject matter. In chapters two and three, I will discuss how Mouchette and LaTurbo Avedon navigate this territory.

The technological advances that are enabling new forms of art bring with them a need for new language to discuss them. From the inception of the Internet and even prior to that in science fiction, a new language has developed to describe virtual situations and the online condition. An attempt to find adequate language to delineate between virtual and physical space is ongoing. This is often done through the use of the term 'URL' (uniform resource locator, meaning web address) to refer to something that has happened online, or 'IRL' (in real life) when talking about something that has happened offline. This is problematic, however, because using the term 'in real life' implies that things that happen online are not real. Throughout this thesis the words 'real life' will be put into inverted commas due to this contention. More recently the term 'AFK', or 'away from keyboard' has taken precedence over 'IRL'.

Since the beginning of Internet art a specific art vocabulary has also developed. The term 'net.art' came about in 1995 when artist Vuk Cosic received an anonymous email that had been glitched in transmission. The only term he could make out in the garbled code was 'net.art' and he began to use it when talking about art online (Greene, 2000). Many other terms

have been used to describe art on the Internet: web art, net art, digital art, new media art, electronic art, and software art. I will use these terms interchangeably in this thesis. More recently the term 'post-internet art', originally coined by Marisa Olson and developed further by writer Gene McHugh to signify "art responding to [a condition] described as 'Post Internet'–when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality" has entered the vocabulary (Vierkant, 2010, p.3).

Chapter One will introduce the theories that I will subsequently use in my discussion of Mouchette in Chapter Two and LaTurbo Avedon in Chapter Three. I will first discuss Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality and power in relation to the Internet. I will then analyse Tiqqun's *Raw Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2001) and several responses to this text: *The Young-Girl and the Selfie* (2013) by Sarah Gram, *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child* (2013) by Mal Ahern and Moira Weigel, and Hannah Black's *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe* (2013). Following this I will discuss some of Slavoj Žižek's theories about the virtual and the real in relation to the Internet. Finally I will consider how Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) can be related to expanded identity online.

In Chapter Two Mouchette.org will be discussed as an example of an artwork which illustrates expanded possibilities of the self on the Internet. Mouchette.org is an interactive website which highlights recent changes in social interaction and identity due to the democratisation of the Internet. I will use the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter One to support this argument.

Chapter Three will outline the work of LaTurbo Avedon, comparing and contrasting it and the themes within it with the work of Mouchette. The technicalities and practical issues of working as an artist without a physical body will be examined, with reference to the theory outlined in Chapter One.

Chapter One

1.1 Sex, Power and the Internet

In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1,* Foucault outlines how since the eighteenth century, sex has entered discourse not as an act of transgression but occurring within power structures (Foucault, 1978, p.33). This has led to a number of things: "discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978, p.101). The Internet is a new location for discourse. Inevitably it has absorbed much of the power structures that Foucault states came into being because of the provocation to speak by experts like doctors, psychologists and lawyers. However, it has its own operations and relationships of power rather than simply being a continuation of these old discourses. It could appear that discourse online is less constrained because anyone with an Internet connection can disperse their views without needing any verification before being published. This can spread misinformation, but it can also broaden discourse because of its egalitarian nature. In this way, those who feel oppressed can express their views, 'undermining', 'exposing' and 'rendering fragile' the views of those in positions of power.

Foucault states that prohibitions have come to control sex, placing it in a binary system of "licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden" (Foucault, 1978, p.83). These prohibitions exist only as a way to exercise power:

> One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of sexuality that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of prohibitions brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power. (Foucault, 1978, p.98)

The "illicit", "forbidden" sexualities are those that are not conducive to reproduction. These sexualities became thought of as perversions. The category of

the perverted constituted "children wise beyond their years, precocious little girls, ambiguous schoolboys" but also "dubious servants and educators, cruel or maniacal husbands, solitary collectors, ramblers with bizarre impulses" (Foucault, 1978, p.40). Children displaying an interest in sex was considered a perversion, and to this day it is still taboo.

> Everyone knew… that children had no sex, which was why they were forbidden to talk about it, why one closed one's eyes and stopped one's ears whenever they came to show evidence to the contrary, and why a general and studied silence was imposed. (Foucault, 1978, p.4)

The Internet and the rise of social media are making it more difficult to close one's eyes and stop one's ears. Young people looking up to and imitating people in the media is nothing new, and celebrities have always been sexualised to some extent. However, social media actively encourages self-branding and promotion. The success of uploaded content is given a value in the form of how much feedback it receives. In addition to this children have access to pornographic material from a young age, and can even happen upon it by accident. This creates an environment in which what Foucault historically classified as perverted is becoming the norm. Children are talking about sex. Prohibiting them from doing so is surely only an expression of the power structures mentioned by Foucault that are ingrained in our collective consciousness.

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (Foucault, 1978, p.6)

The power structures in our society can be brought to attention by deliberately transgressing against them. Equally, by deliberately using the power structures in place, the structure itself becomes evident.

1.2 The Young-Girl, the Selfie, The Man-Child and The Hot Babe

Tiqqun is a French philosophical journal by a group of writers that released publications from 1999 until 2001, when the group broke up. Texts written by the group are signed as Tiqqun rather than by individual writers. *Raw Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* contains a series of definitions for the 'Young-Girl', a figure created by Tiqqun to represent capitalism's model citizen. There have been numerous responses to the text following its translation to English. Tiqqun states that "the Young-Girl is the place where the commodity and the human coexist in an apparently non-contradictory manner" (Tiqqun, 2001, p.31).

The word 'selfie', defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" officially entered the English lexicon in 2013 when it was named Oxford Dictionary's word of the year (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). *The Young-Girl and the Selfie* by Sarah Gram analyses the selfie through Tiqqun's text. Selfies are often labeled as narcissistic. The article argues against this by asserting that the selfie is neither about empowerment nor the male gaze, but instead "the gendered labour of young girls under capitalism" (Gram, 2013). Gram interprets Tiqqun's text by saying that "the Young-Girl is a model citizen of contemporary society not because we worship her but because by expending her energy on the cultivation of her body, her potential as a revolutionary subject is neutralized" (Gram, 2013). Gram elaborates by stating that though it is expected of women to meet certain (often unrealistic) beauty standards, if they are seen to take pride in their appearance they are criticised as being narcissistic. She points out how unfair this shaming is, considering that narcissism "may not only be what capital expects but also *demands* from young girls, in order that they be legible as girls at all" (Gram, 2013).

If the body of the Young-Girl is her primary commodity, her ticket of entry into the world of consumer capitalism (outside of which she is not only useless but also illegible), then her ability to authentically maintain the femininity of her body maintains its value. (Gram, 2013)

Gram proposes that documenting the work that a young girl puts into her appearance shows that she is conscious of her status as a Young-Girl. The selfie, when posted on social media, is a way of acknowledging the labour that she has put into her 'primary commodity'. "The image may assert sexual subordination, but it still asserts" (Gram, 2013). Gram states that even if young women were to stop taking selfies, their bodies would still be spectacles (Gram, 2013). As previously mentioned, she asserts that the selfie is not about empowerment. However, if the bodies of Young-Girls are going to be treated as a spectacle regardless, then taking control of this objectification is surely empowering.

That their bodies are commodities enters them into economies of attention, and that is where the disgust with selfies comes from. In an economy of attention, it is a disaster for men that girls take up physical space and document it, and that this documentation takes up page hits and retweets that could go to 'more important' things. And so the Young-Girl must be punished, with a disgust reserved for the purely trivial. (Gram, 2013)

In *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child* Tiqqun's *Young-Girl* text is criticised as being lazy, sensationalist and sexist. It is noted that Virginia Woolf once said that if a piece of writing was signed as 'Anonymous' that the author was usually a woman, but of late the anonymous writer more often has male voice. The examples of the hacker collective Anonymous with their Guy Fawkes masks, and the "boy bandit aesthetics of the anarchist magazine *Rolling Thunder*" are given (Ahern and Weigel, 2013). The authors posit that Tiqqun assume that their readers will think the best of them, that their writers couldn't possibly be sexist because they speak with authority and appear well-read (Ahern and Weigel, 2013). However, according to Ahern and Weigel the anonymity of

the individual writers in the Tiqqun collective allows for sexism, though it "claims it has lady members and seems eager to reassure us that it does not hate us" (Ahern and Weigel, 2013). The most credit that Ahern and Weigel give the text is that its "self-ironizing speaker" retains a mystery around whether the book is actually sexist or "just impersonating someone sexist in order to make its point" (Ahern and Weigel, 2013). The authors posit that rather than the Young-Girl, the figure that Tiqqun should be examining is in fact "her boyish critic", who they propose we call the "Man-Child" (Ahern and Weigel, 2013). They list a series of Tiqqun-esque aphorisms outlining the Man-Child in a way as derogatory as Tiqqun's description of the Young-Girl:

> The Man-Child tells a racist joke. It is not funny. It is the fact that the Man-Child said something racist that is… The Man-Child breaks up with you even though the two of you are not in a relationship. He cites his fear of settling down. You don't want marriage, at least not with him, but he never thought to ask you. (Ahern and Weigel, 2013)

Mimicking the way that Tiqqun assures us that despite calling her the Young-Girl, the less than complimentary definitions attributed to her are not gendered, Ahern and Weigel state that "just as not all men are Man-Children, neither are all Man-Children men" (Ahern and Weigel, 2013).

In addition to the Man-Child, a figure called the "Hot Babe" has been developed by Hannah Black. *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe* is written in a similar provocative way, making statements about the Hot Babe so sweeping and ridiculous that it mocks Tiqqun's text: "The Hot Babe is a gendered concept" (Black, 2013). The idea of women self-objectifying in order to feel empowered is ridiculed: The Hot Babe objectifies herself "for herself" (Black, 2013). Black cites Beyoncé Knowles to demonstrate this: "I do it for myself because I enjoy fashion, it makes me feel like me" (Knowles in Black, 2013). The Hot Babe also objectifies herself "for all women" (Black, 2013), as pornographic actress Jenna Jameson indicates: "I think that women feel akin to me in a way because I'm so incredibly honest about who I am as a person" (Jameson in Black, 2013). If women are taught that their only value is their youth and beauty,

accepting that and taking control of it may be seen as empowering, but some would argue this displays an internalised misogyny. Black discusses how "social media makes everyone a Hot Babe" (Black, 2013), as users are forced to self-brand and market themselves. Even without intending to create an alternate online persona, all social media users end up developing one. Online activity cannot represent all parts of a personality and therefore only certain facets get portrayed. In this way their online self becomes a collage of various parts of the 'real life' self. This virtual, online body that develops, like the Hot Babe "has no flesh, only a body… it is a collection of parts, a series of images… functions of the flesh disappear and reappear as erotic or repulsive absurdities: two girls, one cup; 2 million girls, one body" (Black, 2013). Black expresses uncertainty about which incarnation of the self is the authentic one. In the Hot Babe, "it is not that Photoshop or cosmetic surgery augments her, but that her 'true' 'self' is concentrated in these augmentations" (Black, 2013)

1.3 The Virtual Self

Slavoj Žižek addresses this idea that the self we inhabit in virtual reality is the true self, the person we would be if it weren't for the constraints of 'real life'. Žižek has written extensively on the subject of the virtual and the real. Virtual realities allow for many realities of the self. The collaged online self can incorporate parts of our personalities which we keep hidden in our day-to-day lives due to social constraints. The option of online anonymity along with a sense of removal and lack of accountability many people feel for their behaviour online encourages 'trying on' personas. Historically this has been possible through writing or creating art under pseudonyms.

In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) Žižek discusses the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix,* which he has used as an example of virtual reality on numerous occasions. He opposes the familiar argument that we are taking fictions too seriously and suggests that we are in fact not taking them seriously enough.

Using the example of video games, he proposes that the way we behave when we embody a virtual persona is the way we would behave if it weren't for social constraints in 'real life':

> The idea is in reality I'm a weak person so in order to supplement my real-life weakness I adopt the false image of a strong, sexually promiscuous person and so on and so on. But this would be the naïve reading. I want to appear stronger, more active because in real life I'm a weak person. But what if we read it in the opposite way, that this strong, brutal rapist identity is my true self, in the sense that this is the psychic truth of myself. And that in real life because of social constraints and so on I am not able to enact it. So that, precisely because I think it is only a game, it's only a persona, a self-image I adopt in virtual space, I can be there much more truthful, I can enact there an identity which is much closer to my true self. (Žižek, 2006)

The 'real me' could be the weak person who counteracts their weakness by adopting a strong virtual persona or the 'real me' could be the virtual persona I embody in virtual realities but suppress in my 'real life' due to societal constraints. Additionally, both of these selves could be within the 'real me'. Within the self there are many different selves.

Again discussing *The Matrix,* Žižek mentions how after the protagonist Neo frees himself from the constraints of the Matrix he is able to "break the physical laws, bend metals, fly in the air" (Žižek, 1999b). Neo's acquiring new abilities through breaking from the constraints of the Matrix can be compared to virtual personas gaining new capabilities due to technological updates. At the start of the 90s when the Internet first became widely available technology was limited and so online personas existed just as personalities expressed through text and an avatar image. Now, in virtual realities like *Second Life* three-dimensional avatars can move around the virtual world doing many things that humans can do. They even have the ability to do things that humans cannot do, such as teleport. Like Neo gaining new abilities in the Matrix, the virtual persona is gaining new abilities through technological advances.

It has been argued that investing time in virtual realities detracts from our experience of 'real life'. However, as Žižek argues, rather than limiting our 'real life' experiences "immersion into cyberspace can intensify our bodily experience (new sensuality, new body with more organs, new sexes…)" (Žižek, 1999b) As mentioned earlier, online pornography has made sex readily available to anyone with an internet connection. The 2013 Spike Jonze film *Her* depicts a future that for the most part feels familiar and not-too-distant. The film centres around a romantic relationship between a man going through a divorce, Theodore Twombly, and Samantha, an intelligent computer operating system. Technology makes new types of sex possible. Sex online through webcams, instant messaging or virtual realities such as Second Life allows it to be freed from physical constraints. The sex that Theodore and Samantha have in *Her* is reminiscent of phone sex, since Samantha doesn't have a body and so they cannot interact physically. Similarly, technology can allow people with physical disabilities to transcend this difficulty.

Žižek warns that as well as intensifying bodily experiences, cyberspace "opens up the possibility for the one who manipulates the machinery which runs the cyberspace literally to steal our own (virtual body), depriving us of the control over it, so that one no longer relates to one's body as to 'one's own'" (Žižek, 1999b). Appropriation of images online is in direct relation to this. Once something is posted online control of it is lost to some extent. Anyone can save something and then re-upload it claiming to be its author. Often when false personas online are created appropriated images belonging to someone else are used to fashion the persona's appearance. In *Her* Samantha develops at an accelerated rate. Her intelligence soon surpasses that of humans and she leaves Theodore. The technology that Theodore purchased and which he fell in love with, ultimately left him. Relationships online are similarly fragile and can be ended quite simply by deleting a contact or pressing the "block" button.

1.4 The Cyborg: From Science Fiction to Art and the Internet

In *A Cyborg Manifesto* Donna Haraway outlines her "ironic dream of a common language for women in the integrated circuit" (1991, p.1). Haraway's manifesto is "an effort to build an ironic myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" (1991, p.1) and argues for "the pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (1991, p.2). Those discussed are the boundaries of "mind and body, animal machine, idealism and materialism" (Haraway, 1991, p.5). Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991, p.1). The cyborg in this text acts as a metaphor for identity in postmodern society but in addition to being metaphorical, the cyborg is a reality, particularly since the democratisation of the Internet. Machines have been integral to our daily lives since the industrial revolution but act even more like bodily extensions with recent inventions like portable computers and smartphones. This is affecting the way we interact with each other as a society and subsequently is transforming the contemporary experience and therefore contemporary art. In this text Haraway attempts to "sketch a picture of possible unity, a picture indebted to socialist and feminist principles of design" (1991, p.10), stressing the "importance of rearrangements in world-wide social relations tied to science and technology" (1991, p.10). As technology becomes increasingly embedded in our lives and the boundaries listed above become blurred, a new system is required.

Haraway lists the cyborgs of science fiction that we are familiar with; "creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" and points out the "modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine" (1991, p2). She states that in the cyborg, "intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is in us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (Haraway, 1991, p.26). Cyborgs no longer exist only in science fiction and

medicine. Artist Neil Harbisson was born colour blind, and now wears an 'eyeborg' device which he developed with cybernetics innovator Adam Montandon. The device translates colours into sounds of varying pitches, which Harbisson has learnt to associate with the corresponding colour. Harbisson creates colour scores, painting what he hears, and video works based on the relationship between colour and sound (Else, 2012). This effectively makes him a cyborg artist. Net artist Anthony Antonellis had an RFID chip implanted in his hand in 2013. Files such as JPEGs, animated GIFs and midi files can be stored on the chip and accessed when his hand is scanned by a smartphone. He plans on using the chip as a way of curating on a micro-level, inviting artists to propose work to be shown in his hand (Galperina, 2013).

Similarly to what Žižek has proposed in relation to *The Matrix* and video games, Haraway discusses how "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (1991, p1). She states that machines in the late twentieth century "have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed… Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 1991, p.3). This is particularly true in the case of the Internet. We are sedentary at our computers, which are now so advanced that through them we can be "disturbingly lively" (Haraway, 1991, p.3) without having to physically move. When we must leave them we are often still connected to the Internet on mobile devices. "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (Haraway, 1991, p.26).

A Cyborg Manifesto emphasises that as we move from "an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system" (1991, p.10) we need a "politics rooted in claims about fundamental changes in the nature of class, race and gender" (1991, p.10). Haraway states that "the actual situation of women is their integration/ exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination" (1991, p.12) and that "the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality…

unalienated labour" (1991, p.2). Therefore the labour that Gram discussed in *The Young Girl and the Selfie* does not apply to Haraway's cyborg, since in a post-gender world women would not need to "maintain the femininity of her body" to "maintain its value" (Gram, 2013).

Haraway also examines Catherine MacKinnon's theory that woman is defined by the desire others have for her. This means that her desirability is comparable to a product she must exchange in order to achieve the status as a woman (MacKinnon in Haraway, 1991, p.9). On social media sites when users upload content it is instantly given a value, in the form of 'likes', 'faves' or comments. Haraway states that "a woman is not simply alienated from her product, but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even a potential subject, since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation" (Haraway, 1991, p.9). Haraway's opinion is that "MacKinnon's 'ontology' constructs a non-subject, a non-being. Another's desire, not the self's labour, is the origin of 'woman'" (1991, p.9), which to Haraway is "a totalization producing what Western patriarchy itself never succeeded in doing — feminists' consciousness of the non-existence of women, except as products of men's desire" (1991, p.9).

Chapter 2

2.1 Neddam, Bresson and Bernanos' Mouchette

Mouchette.org is an interactive website created by Dutch/French artist Martine Neddam in 1996. By navigating through the site visitors discover more and more about its apparent owner, who on the homepage (fig.1) introduces herself as Mouchette, an artist who is "nearly 13 years old". The further visitors explore and interact, the more intimate the information Mouchette shares becomes. Initially the site appears to belong to a real girl, but it soon becomes clear that this is not the case when visitors realise that she has remained the same age since the site's inception. For many years Mouchette.org was shrouded in mystery, as the identity of its author was kept a secret. In 2010 Neddam revealed that she had created it and since then has been running another site: About.Mouchette.org, which functions as a directory for any information posted online relating to Mouchette.org. In addition to Mouchette, Neddam's website lists three other 'virtual persona' projects, but none have gained such prominence as Mouchette.

The narrative of the site and the character of Mouchette are loosely based on a 1967 Robert Bresson film, *Mouchette,* which is based on George Bernanos' novel *Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette* which was written in 1937. These tell the tragic story of a French teenager girl who commits suicide after being raped and then witnessing the death of her ailing mother. At one point there was a page on Mouchette.org containing a questionnaire referencing the Bresson film, but following legal threats from Bresson's widow Neddam took it down (Sant in Santorineos, 2005, p.2). This dispute brought the work to the attention of the net art community and Toni Sant suggested that without that incident Mouchette.org could have slipped under the radar (Sant in Santorineos, 2005, p.2). Sant also highlights how this issue of copyright "raises the question of ownership over fictional identities and underscores the way in which digital media technology has

given easy access to appropriation and recombination of art objects once considered unique and untouchable" (Sant in Santorineos, 2005, p.2).

2.2 Anonymity as a Tool for Discourse

Neddam's experience of running Mouchette anonymously for so long means she can give valuable insight into all aspects of running a virtual persona: the ethical, technical, and emotional. As mentioned in section 1.1, the Internet has created a new space for discourse, with its own characteristics and power structures. "Discourse transmits and produces power" (Foucault 1978, p.101). Mouchette.org prompted discourse: in discussions on the site itself between Mouchette and her visitors, and through critical responses written about the website, one of which will be discussed below. By creating the site, Neddam was able to provoke these conversations. Her anonymity raised questions about the themes the site confronts and the ethics of who was behind it. This incited discourse about the possible dangers of the Internet which at the time was just becoming an issue. Foucault states that discourse "produces power… reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978, p.101). Through Mouchette, Neddam brought these issues into discourse. The site was criticised by some for glorifying the sexualisation of children, but through highlighting this, these power structures were 'exposed', 'rendered fragile' and made possible to prevent.

Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child, discussed in section 1.2, notes that historically if a text was signed as 'Anonymous' one could assume that the author was a woman, but increasingly in the digital age anonymous writers tend to have a male voice. There was a lot of speculation in the 90s over Mouchette and whether her author was a man or a woman. This was the cause of much debate in the online community, as the implications of the site would change depending on the gender of the author.

> If I am a woman, I am surely a cyberfeminist; and if I am a man, a pervert pedophile probably.... I will remain the mental projection of your desire because you will never have access to the body or the name of the person who writes these words (Mouchette in Santorineos, 2005, p.2).

Neddam mentions that this curiosity subsiding was a reason for her revealing herself. She recognised that her anonymity "didn't play such a big role anymore. People were not searching like mad to find out who it really was, whether a man or a woman was making it, etc... They were not excited by the secret anymore, so I just loosened the control" (Neddam in Wall, 2014). As mentioned in section 1.1 the open nature of online discourse can lead to the dissemination of unreliable information. Mouchette.org is an example of this. Fictional information on the site is presented as fact. Neddam stated that keeping her identity a secret for so long "was not easy, but it was a very rich experience" that made her "understand the transmission of identity online (the whois, IP numbers and so on). It might seem just technical, but it became an ingredient of the art" (Neddam in Wall, 2014). A virtual body's skin, bones and soul are made from codes.

When asked if Mouchette's life had an influence on her own, Neddam replied: "Constantly. All the time. Forever maybe. Or at least until I die. I am her slave. She has been using all the way in order to exist. Beware of virtual characters, they possess you, like demons" (Neddam in Wall, 2014). It can be questioned how much of the life and experiences of a virtual person affects the person who is managing them. As discussed in section 1.3, Žižek proposes that the identity we inhabit in virtual reality is more real than the 'real life' us (Žižek, 2006). Although Mouchette had a huge influence on her life, Neddam stressed that she has been able to distinguish between Mouchette's feelings and her own: "I could tell Mouchette was falling in love, with another online person… but it was not me" (Neddam in Wall, 2014). That must have been a very difficult distinction to make. If Žižek's theory is taken into consideration then it could be surmised that it was Neddam, not just Mouchette who was falling in love. Haraway states that "It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation

between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices" (1991, p.24).

2.3 Sexual Symbolism in Mouchette.org

The topic of sexuality in children is a sensitive subject that Mouchette.org forces its visitors to confront. There are multiple examples of sexual symbolism on the site. On the homepage (fig.1), Mouchette introduces herself as being nearly thirteen years old. This information is accompanied by a tiled background image of flowers and the sound of a girl moaning. The flower is often used to symbolise female genitalia, and the moaning sounds like it could be the result of either pleasure or pain. A drop-down menu on the bottom of this page suggestively reads "browse me". From here we can reach the *7 Songs* page, where Mouchette tells us in girlish pink writing that she has composed some songs which "have no words, no title, but I am sure you will understand their meaning." Each of the songs are similar to the audio on the homepage: again we hear Mouchette sobbing, moaning, and gasping. It sounds as if she is experiencing both pain and pleasure simultaneously. On the *Flesh&Blood* page (fig.2) we see an image of a girl with her eyes closed, her mouth open and her tongue and cheek pressed against the screen. Text reads: "Finally, I can come that close to you. Do you also want to come that close to me? Put your cheek on the monitor. How does it feel? Want to know what my tongue tastes like? Try it on your screen and tell me." Visitors can answer these questions in text boxes and by email. Mouchette has already stated that she is 'nearly thirteen', and now she is inviting visitors to taste her tongue, implicating them in an intimate situation with a child. The *Secret* page (fig.3) tells visitors to "run the mouse softly on the mat", "feel... touch in the dark... the arrow turns into a little hand if you just press the mouse... the little pointed finger will penetrate... the secret link". Again the language here is provocative and full of innuendo.

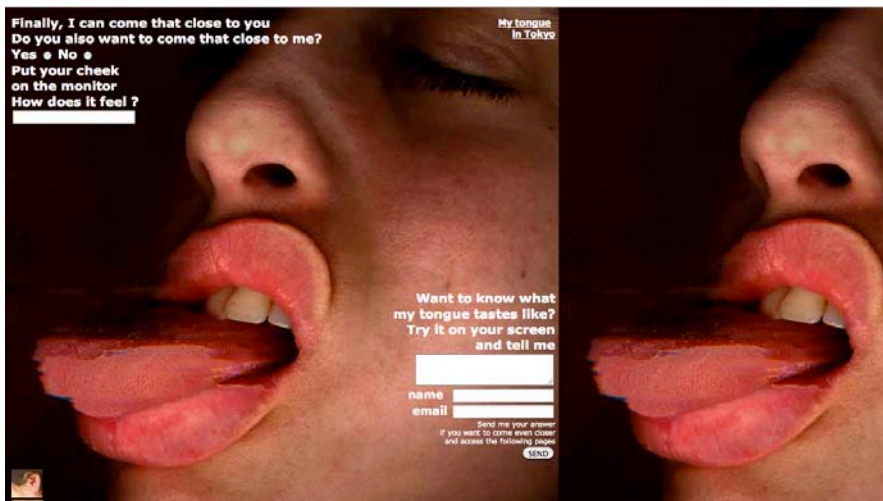Fig.1, screenshot of Mouchette.org Homepage

Fig 2, screenshot of *Flesh&Blood* page on Mouchette.org

Fig 3, screenshot of *Secret* page on Mouchette.org

As outlined in section 1.1, in *The History of Sexuality* Foucault indicates that it was assumed that children didn't have sex, and so they were forbidden from talking about it and if they did speak about it they were categorised as perverted (1978, p.40). Mouchette indicates an interest in sex, fitting the labels of "children wise beyond their years, precocious little girls" (Foucault, 1978, p.40). Neddam expressed that "most children have an interest in sex, it shouldn't be denied, in the name of what, purity? There is a danger of grown-ups taking advantage of children's sexuality… But this danger is even bigger when the interest of children in sexuality is being denied" (Neddam cited in Wall, 2014).

In *A Critical Analysis of Mouchette.org*, which was written while Neddam was still anonymous, Eryk Salvaggio states that "the art can be read as a glorification of youth sexualisation" (Salvaggio, 2002), though he is not accusing the artist of being a paedophile or proclaiming that the site encourages sex with children. He discusses how the sexualisation of young girls has been a feature of art for centuries. He considers the example of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* but makes the distinction that "we are not encouraged to feel sympathy for Humbert, whereas with Mouchette's website, we are directly encouraged to participate in virtual interactions against a young girl" (Salvaggio, 2002). He thinks that the website attempts to draw out "the inner pedophile" (Salvaggio, 2002). Acknowledging that it shouldn't matter if a website recognizes the existence of sexuality in children, he highlights the difficulty in the fact that "there is a rampant tendency among pedophiles to defend themselves with the argument that their victims wanted to have sex; that children can and will deliberately seduce adults as a result of 'hormones' or some misguided desire for affection" (Savlaggio, 2002). Salvaggio criticises the Mouchette.org as a glorification of sexual abuse. Neddam states that the danger of adults taking advantage of children's sexuality is increased if children's sexuality is forbidden. Mouchette.org displays a child displaying an interest in sexuality, perhaps with the aim of indicating that no matter how provocative, flirtatious or seductive a child behaves, they are never attempting to draw out an "inner paedophile".

Chapter 3

3.1 Creating Art as a Virtual Body

LaTurbo Avedon in an internet-based artist whose work consists of performance, self-portraiture, 3D modeling and digital sculpture. Avedon describes herself as an avatar, which is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as "a manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher", "an incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea" or "an icon or figure representing a particular person in a computer game, Internet forum, etc". She exists purely online, on various gaming and social media platforms. Avedon is a three-dimensional render, made in various 3D modeling softwares. For the most part she works and exhibits online, though her first physical-space exhibition, *New Sculpt,* took place at Transfer Gallery, New York in July 2013. For the work in *New Sculpt* Avedon translated image files into digital 3D sculptures. A physical body does not limit Avedon; she is only limited by technology. In the *New Sculpt* (2013) series she subverts the idea of the self-portrait by converting image files into sculptural 3D objects that render the original image unrecognisable, for example *Body,* (2013) (fig.4) In an essay that accompanied the *New Sculpt* exhibition, Daniel Rourke said:

> LaTurbo Avedon's physical anonymity is more than a gesture to liquid social media identities, or the utopian 'immaterial' embodiment yearned for by transhumanists... as a parasubject LaTurbo Avedon breaks down the categorical distinctions between her sculptures and her self, asking to be considered as one considers a cubist abstraction. Unseeable, ineffable – beyond computation – polygons are rich. Their vertices contradict themselves; as subjects they contain multitudes."
> (Rourke, 2013, p.6)

Avedon doesn't see much a difference between herself and the way anyone else presents themselves online, "sharing pics, making things and chatting via social media" (Avedon in Palop, 2013). However, attempting to define

Avedon in the same way as a physical human being will only lead to frustration. Avedon stated that she doesn't really have a nationality, but is often asked where she is from when taking part in exhibitions and usually lists that she is from the Internet (Avedon in Wall, 2014). As for her age, she mentions a difficulty in specifying it, since she creates herself "again and again using different services" and so it changes depending on what platform she is using (Avedon in Wall, 2014). In this sense she is similar to Mouchette in that we can only interact with her online.

In *Save 01 – Club Rothko (from New Wild West)* (2012) (fig.5), a three minute long video, Avedon dances provocatively in front of a framed picture of Slavoj Zizek in Club Rothko. The video description reads: "A desperate LaTurbo Avedon goes to Club Rothko, attempting to rouse the long frozen portrait of Slavoj Žižek." Avedon stated that this work "was a way of having a conversation with some of those concepts" that Žižek has written about and are central to her work: "reality, the virtual, cyberspace" (Avedon in Wall, 2014).

Club Rothko is a location Avedon has used for several works. She stated that when she was working mostly in Second Life she often noticed "famous artworks and images being used as surface textures for buildings and objects. In virtual space the physical preciousness of an art object is stripped away… A Caravaggio can be used as a texture for a lounge chair or a miniskirt if you wanted" (Avedon in Wall, 2014). This is another example of the widespread appropriation that exists on the Internet. Club Rothko, a nightclub with Mark Rothko paintings as wallpaper, plays with this possibility.

Fig 4, *Body* (2013)

Fig 5, screenshot from *Save 01 – Club Rothko (from New Wild West)* (2012)

3.2 Potent Fusions and Dangerous Possibilities

Section 2.1 discussed the novel and film that influenced Mouchette. Avedon's work often employs her own image. She features in most of her video work and frequently posts self-portraits on her Facebook page. Avedon constructs her appearance from "lots of little pieces—Quistis Trepe, Petra Cortright, Miley Cyrus, Madonna, Cammy" (Avedon in Naziripour, 2014), though her image changes depending on the platform she is using. For example, she states that in *Skyrim*, a role-playing video game, she has to go without her favourite accessories and hairstyles. (Avedon in Nazitipour, 2014)

> LaTurbo's chameleonic qualities are reminiscent of a lot of contemporary pop icons, but she executes this fakeness in a way that, like her game nostalgia, is wholly authentic, multi-layered. An avatar is fake by design. Renders can become whatever they want as easily as they can be sculpted. We expect fakeness from an avatar, just as we expect fakeness in the darkness of nightclubs and in the pages of magazines (Naziripour, 2014).

As previously mentioned, appropriation is widespread on the Internet. Haraway discusses how "the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism… the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other" (1991, p.2) is inherent in Western science and politics. Avedon is a good example of this, as she is a composite of various images and ideas.

In contrast to Mouchette, people seem happy to interact with Avedon without probing into who her author may be. In section 2.2 Neddam was quoted stating that while she was still anonymous, the general opinion was that if the author of Mouchette.org was a woman she was "surely a cyberfeminist" but if it was a man he was "a pervert pedophile probably" (Mouchette in Santorineos, 2005, p.2). It is difficult to surmise Avedon's gender, though she stated in

interview that she is "a feminist with the emphasis on… plurality, understanding that the shape of this world is one that contains many meanings" (Avedon in Wall, 2014). In *A Cyborg Manifesto* Haraway states that "cyborg feminists have to argue that 'we' do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole" (1991, p.8). There are many different feminisms which cannot all be put into the same category.

> The Network is creating conditions that enable new kinds of emotive and fictive spaces—which in turn enable new kinds of fiction and new ways of *being fictive*. The Network creates new relationships between being fictive and being real(ized). Being fictive becomes seen as an integral part of being real. It deepens understanding by creating multiple perspectives, made possible by existing as multiple personas (Renan, 1996, p.62).

Discussing Mouchette.org, Avedon pointed out that "the usual boundaries of fiction fall away in the context of the website" (Avedon in Wall, 2014). She states that "the nearness of an author is often suspended in literature, allowing the narrative to unfold within the container of the book or the file without contest. However with pseudonymous online works like Mouchette.org, the content is not immediately distinguishable as fiction (Avedon in Wall, 2014). Perhaps the reason why the response to Avedon has been less probing is because her appearance is that of a 3D render and thus the fiction is immediately obvious, allowing it to be engaged with without the hesitance and one might experience when happening upon Mouchette.org for the first time without knowing it is a fiction.

Neddam's relationship with Mouchette was examined in section 2.1. The language that Martine Neddam used when discussing this relation implied the character's autonomy from its author, at times even suggesting that Mouchette controls Neddam, and is capable of falling in love independently of the emotions of her creator (Neddam in Wall, 2014). Discussing Mouchette, Avedon stated that though "Neddam's identity is associated as the author of the works… Mouchette retains the personhood created from the site" (Avedon in Wall, 2014). In *A Cyborg Manifesto* Haraway addresses the blurring of boundaries in technology,

stating that "it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine" (1991, p.26).

Final Fantasy (poem) (2013) (fig.6) is a video piece in which a silhouette of Avedon is dancing in slow-motion, accompanied by a droning sound while a computerized voice reads "a compilation of pop song lyrics with the exception of the line 'potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities'" (Avedon in Wall, 2014). In A Cyborg Manifesto Donna Haraway states that her "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (1991, p.5). This work treats lyrics from pop songs and Haraway's cyborg myth as equally valuable. For Avedon, her future, her 'final fantasy' is as much in the hands of the pop culture that dictates her appearance as it is dependent on technological advances and the way these advances, and the advances of society affects the treatment of women.

Fig 6, *Final Fantasy (poem)* (2013)

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the implications of technological developments and the Internet on society on the way we define the self and portray identity. New ways of disseminating information about the self and portraying personality has been examined, with a focus on the effect this has had on Internet art and the representation of women within it. Technology is allowing the boundaries of identity to be expanded. Our identity is limited by the ways in which we can express ourselves. Limits can be societal: what is permitted and what is forbidden, laws and cultural norms. Conversely, limits can be based on what is actually possible, not what we are *allowed* to do but what we *can* do.

The texts inspired by the Young-Girl and Foucault's theories in *The History of Sexuality* mostly dealt with how identity is formed based on what is allowed/prohibited by law and cultural norms. These exist because of power structures in society.

The texts by Žižek and Haraway mostly dealt with the way in which identity formation is shaped by actual possibilities. Technological advances bring with them new possibilities for the self which can highlight and in some cases overturn the power structures.

Chapter One outlined in detail these theories which inform my analysis of virtual personas Mouchette and LaTurbo Avedon. Foucault's theories on sex and power in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* were discussed. His proposal that sex is defined by power structures embedded in society was applied to the new social space of the Internet, suggesting that though the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon, it has absorbed the societal power structures that Foucault outlines came into being since the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Internet was put forward as a place that might be valuable to highlight and therefore critique these power structures. Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the*

Young-Girl was briefly discussed with emphasis placed on several internet-aware critical responses to this text; *The Young-Girl and the Selfie, Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child and Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe. The Young-Girl and the Selfie* proposed that society's contempt towards the selfie is based on the fact that they are an acknowledgement of the labour that women put into their appearance and patriarchal society doesn't want this labour to be recognised as that recognition is currency in an economy of attention. The *Man Child* text proposes that the noteworthy citizen of society that Tiqqun should have written about is not the Young-Girl, but instead is "her boyish critic", the Man-Child. *Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Hot Babe* mocks the ideas set out in *The Young Girl and the Selfie,* declaring the Young-Girl character, who is here called the Hot-Babe as narcissistic.

Slavoj Zizek's theories on the virtual and the real were discussed and used to legitimise the authenticity of things that happen online. Haraway's essay A Cyborg Manifesto outlined a feminist "myth" for a high-tech society, proposing that technological advances could lead to a utopian society in which discrimination based on class, race or gender does not exist.

Chapter 2 discussed the website and artwork Mouchette.org as an example of a way to expand identity through the creation of an online persona. Martine Neddam's influences when making this artwork were discussed, as well as appropriation as a tool in the creation of art. In section 2.2, anonymity as a tool for exploring taboo subject matter was addressed, as well as the way in which anonymity has been gendered throughout the years. Finally the sexual symbolism in Mouchette.org was discussed.

Chapter 3 examined the Internet artist and avatar LaTurbo Avedon. Her practice was discussed, noting the possibilities she has because of her not having a physical body. Appropriation in her work and her appearance was discussed. The attitudes with which people interact with Avedon in comparison to Mouchette were discussed, and her being obviously fictional was proposed as a reason why she is treated with less caution and suspicion.

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