
The Burden of Selfhood

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Abstract

The Burden of Selfhood is an interdisciplinary performance artwork exploring the intersection of feminism, identity and technology. By connecting methods from cognitive science, music, poetry, video and performance art, we investigate the experience of viewing and being viewed as a gendered body. Technology has accelerated the recursive gaze to the point that we continually perform and project back onto each other our internalized expectations for unattainable perfection. This poly-vocal performance uses large-scale data visualizations and live performers to make explicit both the collective gaze and the implicit impact of being seen.

Select portions of the performance can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPk2JSt-e9Q>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1DXmiBU_3w

Author Keywords

Performance; feminism; identity; self; gaze; beauty; makeup; tutorial videos; YouTube; eye-tracking; projection mapping; experimental music.

CSS Concepts

Applied Computing ~ Arts and Humanities ~ Media Arts

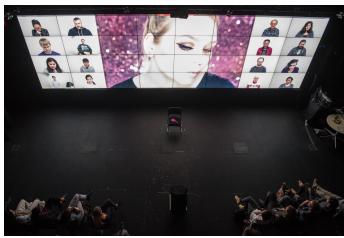


Figure 2: The CALIT2 VROOM features a tiled display of 32 full HD narrow-bezel screens that can be employed distinctly, or as a single surface, yielding up to 66 million pixels on the entire wall ($15,360 \times 4,320$ pixels).



Figure 3: Eye-tracking of source makeup tutorials is juxtaposed with physical responses of viewers in our empirical research.

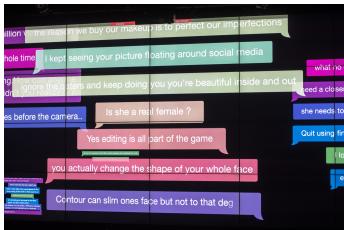


Figure 4: Original poetry is juxtaposed with comments from YouTube viewers and narrative interviews in animation.



Figure 1: The opening visual of the piece is composed of a word cloud visualization, generated from word frequency analyses of public comments on the corpus of makeup tutorial videos that constitute the source data for our research. The language of commenters reflects back upon the YouTube-performers, exposing the duality of empowerment and inadequacy in their mediated messages.

Introduction

Meaning marks us. The body carries with it messages—implicit codes distributed through culture and technology, inscribed on our bodies and constraining our behavior. Amplified through the prismatic lens of networked computation, these messages are fractured: refracting divergent intentions and consequences of self, social and political agencies. In *The Burden of Selfhood* we make explicit the cumulative and recursive effects of these messages on the mediated self, mapping them onto live performing, vulnerable, and gendered bodies.

In our research, we analyzed a corpus of YouTube make-up tutorial videos [1-20] representing a diversity of human ages, gender identities and ethnicities. These videos illustrate the drastic measures some individuals will take to augment or alter the landscape of their faces in pursuit of societal ideas of perfection. With an empirical lens, we invited eighteen research subjects into the laboratory to view a sample of videos while we tracked their eye-movements and facial reactions. Following contextual interviews with each subject, we performed thematic and linguistic analyses to construct data visualizations (see Figures 1,4,12) exposing aspects of the original dialogue with the corresponding

effects on individuals who view them. The eye-gaze data, combined with narrative response and interview excerpts were contextualized and integrated into multimedia documentary content, critically deconstructing what is often overlooked by media creator-consumers.

The Performative Experience

The Burden of Selfhood was first produced as a part of the IDEAS Series (Initiative for Digital Exploration of Arts and Sciences) at the San Diego CALIT2 /Qualcomm Institute (QI). It was staged as a 45-minute art performance in the CALIT2 Theatre, a Black Box space featuring a 32-screen tiled visualization display wall (VROOM—see Figure 2). The performance begins with a narrative experimental documentary displayed on the VROOM. The visual media include video clips sourced from YouTube, interviews collected during our empirical research (see Figure 3), animations (Figures 4,8,12), and creative-coded sequences. These visuals are presented in dialog with electroacoustic music using text-to-speech techniques, synthesized and pre-recorded human voices. A prepared piano called a “Disklavier” plays its own version of text-to-speech by translating human



Figure 5: The performer prepares to be inscribed.



Figure 6: Contouring makeup is applied to the performer's face in real-time via projection-mapping.



Figure 7: Emergent themes are inscribed on the performers face until her likeness is erased, overwritten by the messaging she absorbs.

All Photo credits: Alex Matthews, Qualcomm Institute.

narration of original poetry into piano notes. The use of the Disklavier in this way underscores the idea of giving voice to those who may not be heard. The installation closes with a live performance when the performer—seated in the audience—takes her place before the VROOM (Figure 5). We employ live video projection-mapping to display two-dimensional media onto the performer's face in real-time (Figures 6,7). Using the face as a surface for inscription, the projected video transforms the performer as we mirror the process of reconstructing identity. Through visualization, projection mapping and music, we experience the face as a malleable humanistic surface bearing traces of all the data it absorbs. This idea of reshaping and augmentation points to the underlying desires of our source data: makeup tutorial videos drastically change our outer appearance in pursuit of acceptance and self-worth. *The Burden of Selfhood* aims to deconstruct these desires and reflect their complexities in an open-ended, interdisciplinary media experiment.

Critical Perspectives

The Burden of Selfhood seeks to quantify the affective intensities generated by viewing and being viewed as a gendered subject, which carry with them implicit expectations around female selfhood. It engages critical lenses of digital media studies and feminist theory, using techniques from art practice and cognitive science to magnify the impact of the subtle social influences in user-generated media and their effect on consumers of that media.

We invite viewers to analyze this recursive loop of media biases towards gendered standards of beauty, in which representations of the body are normalized and considered desirable. These biases are internalized and

then perpetuated in examples of user-generated media found online in places such as YouTube. Through the performance we scaffold viewers in looking at the collective—macro view—and zooming in to the individual—the micro view—of this media (Figures 9, 10). Against a backdrop of the historical roots of material cosmetics (Figure 11) we prompt viewers to reflect on how we collectively and individually absorb, respond to, and are affected by explicit claims of empowerment, intrinsic message of alteration, and the pervasive language of inadequacy (Figure 12).

Artist Biographies

Stefani Byrd's artistic practice includes video installation, new media, and interactive technologies. Her practice aims to shed light on the complicated nature of communication within a contemporary culture where social stereotypes often define our interactions. She is an MFA alumna and current Lecturer in the ICAM (Interdisciplinary Computing and the Arts) major in the Visual Arts department at UCSD.

Sarah Ciston is an experimental writer and media artist named one of San Francisco Weekly's "Best Writers Without a Book." She holds an MFA in Hybrid Literature from UC San Diego and is an Annenberg Fellow in Media Arts + Practice at University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts.

Amy Rae Fox is an information designer and doctoral student in Cognitive Science at UCSD. Her research examines the relationship between external representations and cognitive activity, exploring how representations of abstract concepts engender novel insights, pushing the boundaries of human conceptual processing.

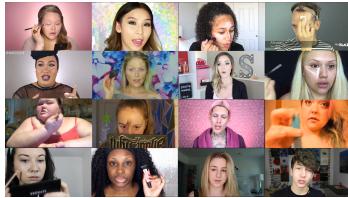


Figure 9: We present the transformation from *naked* to *mediated* across the corpus.



Figure 10: The performers reveal "The Power of Makeup."



Figure 11: We leverage historical footage of cosmetic commercials and messaging [21].



Figure 12: Linguistic analysis and visualization reveals the pervasive messages of inadequacy employed by YouTube-performers in the tutorials, standing in direct conflicts with the explicit messages of empowerment.

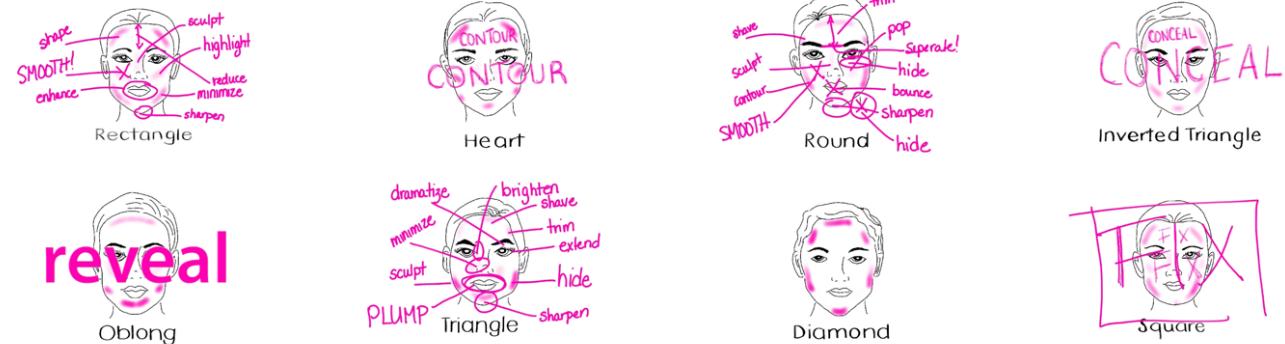


Figure 8: Motion graphic animations were constructed in Adobe After Effects and Premier Pro, mirroring the process of applying 'contouring' makeup as described in the source video materials. Prominently interspersed in these segments are the verbs identified through linguistic analysis as most frequent in the source video dialogue.

Heidi Kayser's interdisciplinary work interweaves sculpture with performance, fashion, photography, drawing and digital media and examines the relationship between body and self-image. A UCSD MFA Alum, she recently premiered the CARAPACE Collection of sculptural garments on the runway at the CUSP Fashion Show and is currently working on a public art sculpture and performance in Los Angeles.

Fernanda Aoki Navarro is a composer who works with instrumental and electronic music and has been exploring performance art and installation. She's currently pursuing her PhD at UCSD and is engaged with promoting experimental music as a producer and curator of concerts and music festivals.

Select portions of the performance can be found at :
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPk2JSt-e9Q> and
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1DXmiBU_3w

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