

*DART4300 Position Paper*

Research question: How can contemporary Internet-based artists integrate post-human theories in their abstraction of their identities?

**Part 1: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH (362 Words)**

The topic I wish to explore will engage post-human readings of Internet-based art in the modern age and the alteration of social, geographical, and gender identity. Earlier writings on identity in Internet art speak of the ethnographic studies that have taken place from these new social connections as an outside perspective. However, I would seek to posit the following as a fellow member of the subcultures and microgenres that permeate the Internet community: the technical limitations of the Internet medium as well as its high level of anonymity have allowed practitioners to explore new identities in between and amongst those of the physical and the digital.

Imagine a hypothetical scenario where an individual akin to the prisoners of Plato's famous thought experiment, is unaware or otherwise not aware of their physical presence. Instead, they can only perceive a virtual reality (the cave) and are given full autonomy over how they are perceived in this space. In this space, the meat-space cannot force someone into a gender role based on physiological sex, and thus freedom is afforded to the individual to express their true gender identity. Dysmorphia in such a space could not exist. Indeed, the mode for many post-colonial forms of oppression in the modern world are based on a physical trait; in a digital world these traits can be altered and are made meaningless. In this space, is it right to erase these experiences in the interest of conformity or "assimilation"? In my practice, I would like to explore these dichotomies as shown in my research topic. The experience of disconnect between meat-space and digital space causing a clash of the senses. The cultural clash of erasing identities versus allowing these new viewpoints to thrive and be explored in digital space. The post-productive nature of the Internet is a minefield of iteration and reiteration that in post-human thinking look to push the boundaries of identity. I will explore several methods I have seen as a netizen for people to develop alternate online personalities that differ from real life, including the invent and proliferation of isolated gender roles and the concept of the avatar.

## Part 2: OVERVIEW OF FIELD (1535 Words)

### The Fluidity of the Avatar

The concept of the avatar (lit. “descent”) originates from Hinduism and describes the vessel from which a deity interacts with Earth<sup>1</sup>. Its use in Internet lingo is therefore apt, for the concept of the avatar is simply a projection of the user. The main form of self-creation that most people have on the Internet is in the persona or avatar that they choose to identify as online: a transmutable and self-reflective entity. Josephine Bosma examines the role of personas by splitting them into “heroes” and “ghosts”. Her description of the “ghost” persona signals the fluidity of such selves, being both a reflexive entity constantly changing through interactions, and an ethereal creature not limited by physicality<sup>2</sup>. Particularly, Bosma examines the character of Keiko Suzuki in looking at this fluidity. Suzuki was the moniker for an art.net board moderator character, that could be accessed by all members of the board; a democratic persona untethered and in a quantum state of existence and not existence<sup>3</sup>. Bosma, through correspondence, concluded she became “a near visualisation of the net psyche,” an amalgamation of all her users<sup>4</sup>. We can see through Bosma and Suzuki’s correspondence, an interesting examination of the aforementioned viewpoints of a post-human body, when asked if Suzuki experienced any forms of discrimination as a practitioner. She responds: “Nobody harasses that [Suzuki in lore is modelled after Japanese cyber-punk aesthetics exemplified in works like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Akira*], everybody just loves you and I don't mind<sup>5</sup>.” The question is interesting as it brings to the forefront the quantum state Suzuki exists in; for some of her portrayals there may be discrimination, for others not so, she is simultaneously male and female, oppressed and free. It may be a character but there are true feelings in her correspondence, is she at least somewhat real then? This fluidity gives a space between post-colonial definitions that allow practitioners to examine how we ascribe traits onto characters and personalities.

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<sup>1</sup> Lochtefield, J. (2002). *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. A-M: Rosen Publishing. 72-73.

<sup>2</sup> Owens, G. (2003). *How has Internet Art dealing with the theme of identity challenged the notion of authorship and the traditional artist/audience relationship?* Masters. University of Central Lancashire.

<sup>3</sup> Bosma, J. (2011). *Nettitudes: Let's Talk Net Art*. NAI Publishers. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Nettime.org, (1997). *Josephine Bosma on Sat, 29 Nov 1997 19:24:57 +0100 (MET)*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9711/msg00038.html> [Accessed 12 Apr. 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

A notion I wish to address quickly is that of the boundaries from which we define the identity of Suzuki. In terms of a tangible work, there is no physical or isolated containment for her; the only evidence for her existence is her correspondence. “Our inability to circumscribe the project, to trace the creative intelligence behind it, or to identify any specific art object seriously challenges our notion of Keiko Suzuki as being a work of art at all<sup>6</sup>.”

### Addressing Sexuality with an Immaterial Body

Seeking post-Internet researchers dealing with physical identity, I examined *Bodies in Space* by Karen Archey, who explored the evolution and expressions of sexuality online, the blending of the physical and digital and a culture of scopophilia inherent in the Internet aesthetic. The post-human body, in her research, is one “emancipated” from the physical body, one that can interact without the social implications inherent in the physical<sup>7</sup>. As described in *Bodies in Space*, artist Charlotte Prodger demonstrates the development of niche fetish groups/subcultures that have arisen due to the removal of suppressive social structures like the interpellation of gender or sexuality, in an anonymous space<sup>8</sup>. The proliferation of these groups bring into question the materiality of the subject matter, depicting a body curated by the author to fit a certain scopophilic gaze that is post-produced, as well as the ability for the image to illicit a physical response in the body whilst existing only as information<sup>9</sup>. As a casual observer, such groups are the result of a repression in mainstream society and the question of whether these representations are reflective to the core identity of the individuals that inhabit them is something I would wish to explore. For instance, the “doller” subculture in Archey’s paper exemplifies the performative nature of an exaggerated persona in examining gender representation and femininity. These caricatures of anime figures, characterised by uncanny masks and matte costumes, focus both on exaggerating the feminine and sexual in body shapes, and makes the fictional material. There is a blurring of the line between the fake and the real that practitioners can use to dismantle reality as an objective mode of identity<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Owens, G.

<sup>7</sup> Cornell, L, Halter, E, & Phillips, L (2015). *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 451-469. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [16 April 2021].

<sup>8</sup> Prodger, C. (2015). *Stonemollan Trail*. [HD video]. London: LUX.

<sup>9</sup> Cornell, L, Halter, E, & Phillips, L, p. 458.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

By further exploring the interplays between real social tensions in the virtual world we can also see how modes of discrimination can leak into virtual identities. The artist Angelo Washko examines in her work *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behaviour Awareness in World of Warcraft*, how post-colonial structures of discrimination, systemic in nature, relics from meat-space, persist in digital spaces with avatars that may or may not actually represent the user.<sup>11</sup> The performative gesture of playing as a female-presenting character in World of Warcraft is a statement that can draw ire from a primarily male-dominated userbase<sup>12</sup>. This implies an interconnection between the physical troubles of the real-world permeating into the virtual, and thus there is no real distinction from the two in this state. We can draw attention to this irony to draw new meanings on how people interact with online identities based on physical preconceptions.

### Reflexivity

It is important to look at pre-Internet studies on identity manifestation, as we can posit how the Internet can change these manifestations. At its core, the Internet has become a new social context, an environment that can shape cultures through inter-connectivity and challenging of ideas. As suggested by Anthony Giddens, an altered perception of the world (through the Internet) can translate to an altered perception of self within that world. Giddens proposed self-identity as being a reflexive project in that the self is informed by the altered environment, and that that identity itself shapes the environment through its perception by others, creating a feedback loop<sup>13</sup>. By applying this notion to the many various microgenres and subcultures, we have a petri dish of self-evolving identities and beliefs unchallenged by social scopophilia. Individuality has been identified as being an appropriation of subjective markers such as other social, collective, and cultural identities. Stacey Koosel posits that the added identities made available to us via the Internet offer vastly new experiences and identities, as well as new opportunities to communicate them<sup>14</sup>. The accessibility of the Internet can serve to amplify an already complex mix of self/community, private/public, offline/online paradigms, in how people choose to present themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> Washko, A. (2012). *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behaviour Awareness in World of Warcraft*. [Internet performance]. Pittsburgh.

<sup>12</sup> Cornell, L, Halter, E, & Phillips, L, p. 459.

<sup>13</sup> Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Later Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>14</sup> Koosel, S. (2013). *Ethnographies of Social Networks: How Artists Negotiate Digital Identity*. [online] interartive. Available at: <https://interartive.org/2013/05/ethnographies-social-networks-artist-digital-identity/>.

We can also look at the development of identity through interaction in a dramaturgical sense, as seen in Erving Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* as he posits the idea of identity as performative and reliant on social contexts and environments<sup>15</sup>. Already, consider the curation of Facebook timelines and of streaming personalities; art portfolios curated to give the best impression of yourself<sup>16</sup>. In a slightly more material sense, avatars in Role Playing Games are made to fit a certain performative niche. Examining virtual spaces such as Second Life we can look at the roleplaying aspects of the game through their community, even outside of the typical game narrative. The world is a canvas, a non-space, and yet marketplaces, communities have appeared in the virtual space: strip clubs and amusement parks are created and staffed by users performing a role and developing a second identity<sup>17</sup>. The aforementioned petri dish of subculture is amplified by the Internet's structures of anonymity and alteration allowing for performative experimentative identity to persist.

### *Postproduction and A Certain Viewpoint*

*Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?* By Hito Steyerl speaks to the curation of the online identity at the corporate level. Like the military-industrial-entertainment complex that permeates the post-cinema<sup>18</sup>, where colonial imperialism is glorified, there is evidence to suggest the post-production and twisting of the Internet. Networked space has become a medium able to be shaped and played with and doctored, a "promiscuous, posthumous state," where the objective truth is doctored to fit a certain narrative<sup>19</sup>. The Internet is not a true representation of the world; there is an interesting dichotomy between image, world, and the strange quantum state of the two. Steyerl notes the use of Google Maps and how Google (the corporation) chooses to represent disputed territory. Areas like the Gaza Strip, Bir Tawil, and unrecognised countries on the Internet exist in a quantum state of belonging to both and neither territory; no identity afforded to them. With this post-production of the Internet there is a proliferation of these quantum spaces, of duality to keep political diplomacy – there will be no sole identity where a hybrid identity to satisfy everyone exists.

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<sup>15</sup> Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books. p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> Koosel, S.

<sup>17</sup> Grant, E. (2009). The interaction order of Second Life: how micro sociology can contribute to online games innovation. Sydney: Australian Sociological Association. 1-19.

<sup>18</sup> Steyerl, H. (2013). Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead? *E-flux*, [online] Volume 49(2), p. 26. Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/> [Accessed 08 Apr. 2021].

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The internet is in flux and for its netizens they are forced to be transient; reality is disintegrating as physicality becomes further abstracted by political boundaries. People are similarly being pushed into postproduction of their own identity in a reflection of this non-real realm they find themselves in. Circulationism, the proliferation of images to be post-produced instead of produced, for identities and images to be iterated on, may allow for the recontextualisation of perception within the Internet<sup>20</sup>. In this system there is an opportunity for identity to become more transient as the objectivity of meat-space is challenged. The Internet machine relies on self-produced content and will die without it.

### **Part 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS (1232 Words)**

#### Overview

Post-human theoretical frameworks have been used to restructure and reinforce the physical body, dealing with the dualities between human and the hardware they use. There is a physicality to post-human theory, often defaulting to trans-humanism, in contextualising thinking around the body; inherently linking identity to a physical form. In terms of exploring the interplays of identity, the body is a limitation that serves to bring attention to itself only. The body carries inherent connotations of post-colonial thinking that can only be examined when the body is not the centre for theoretical thinking. In my practice I intend to engage with Object Orientated Ontology as a framework for recontextualising the notion of self to an immaterial state, to the proliferation of information rather than its content, to the ones and zeroes that exist only in unknown data centres. I would intend to explore the use of human-computer interactive technologies in the studio to further support the hypothesis of hybridity between online and offline leading to quantum identity: technologies like face tracking and mapping, and virtual reality developments demonstrate a shift away from the body as sacrosanct and afford the user alternate viewpoints and perspectives in line with OOO. Research methods would include online based observation of practitioners, especially of members of subcultures such as the V-Tuber community who perform exaggerated anime characters adjacent to or informed by the identity of the performer. I posit that the reflexive nature of the two constitutes a redefinition of identity to a more abstracted form. Initially I have conducted short interviews with these community members to support my hypothesis.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

### Object Orientated Ontology and the Recontextualisation of Self

Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a method of post-human thinking proposed by theorist Graham Harman and posits a post-human conceptualisation that is relative to the objectivity of the universe rather than relative to humans: proponents are concerned with object-object interactions as much as they are with human-world interactions<sup>21</sup>. By shifting identity from the human to the structures and inhabitants of the Internet there is more freedom afforded to manipulate the notion of identity. From an ontological standpoint, we can link the disembodied identity of an Internet persona to the geolocation of its information, or to the nodes that access it rather than the body that may not have to exist. From this we can force a change in thinking; we can explore “specific fusions of human being with technologies,” both in its intangible software and tangible hardware forms<sup>22</sup>. Objects are afforded identity. Electrons in wires are afforded identity. As Harman notes, “The way a rock and a wave encounter each other is only one way the rock and the wave can be expressed. These are ‘caricatures’ of the object. Realism is the unknowable infinite fullness of the object.<sup>23</sup>” The object of the identity has yet to be fully actualised and realised, and there are many more opportunities to “know” it. In my practice I look to develop these personalities that do not exist as a subset of my own experiences but as an entity in relation to its materiality as information; inanimate objects will be given a voice in my practice, as will the monolithic notion of internet society.

### Internet Interface Technologies

As a media arts practitioner, I want to explore the use of human-interface technologies to challenge and separate the persona, to allow one to exist in a digital space. Items such as the virtual reality headset, and the development of haptic sensors serve to blur the sensual line between meat-space and virtual space and give the impression of materiality in an altered world. An opportunity to examine the reflexive nature of personality. The tension between the two modes will allow for the creation of new perceptions and new contexts, as objects are contextualised physically and virtually<sup>24</sup>. By challenging one’s existence in the two spaces I hope to blur the line between the real life and Internet persona at an introspective level.

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<sup>21</sup> Harman, G. (2015). Object-Oriented Ontology. The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 403.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Alternatively, the use of technology mapping tools like FaceRig and the Kinect sensor instead use the physical space to help inform the digital space and produce an iterative work. These mapping technologies serve to challenge Internet-based perceptions<sup>25</sup>. Performance using these tools would hopefully allow for recontextualisation of the meaning of the work to the audience as proposed by Barthes' *Death of the Author*, and thus supply an altered sense of identity<sup>26</sup>. Mapping tools can work to obscure the inherent colonial connotations of the body and offer new identities within a free space. A practitioner can amplify any one aspect of the body for deconstruction at will and alter their mapped subject to diminish or exaggerate.

### Online-based Observation of Subcultures

The recent phenomenon of the Virtual Youtuber (though its prominence exceeds the platform) consists of a central character, a "V-Tuber", a two- or three-dimensional character often styled after the anime aesthetic prevalent on the Internet. These characters often have backstories inscribed upon them either through visual cues inherent in the model, or through established writing. These characters are then portrayed by a practitioner who creates a performative identity to suit the character, from which they interact with an Internet-based audience through face-tracking animations. I posit there is the opportunity for hybrid identities through this interplay, wherein the point between actor and character is obscured and warped through character interactions and development. There is no true definition between the two in the act. To support this conclusion, I intend to conduct interviews and autoethnographic studies within these types of communities to give others the opportunity to speak to their sense of identity. From preliminary interviews, I received the following from the question of how separated performers are from their V-tuber personality<sup>27</sup>.

While how I may act in places such as school may be drastically different to how I act online in the VTuber community, I still feel as if I'm not actually portraying a character but just a side of me that I never usually get to show in real life.

(@zurayon, Male)

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<sup>25</sup> Paul C. (2016). *A Companion to Digital Art, First Edition*. London: John Wiley and Sons, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Barthes, R. (1977). *The death of the author*. London: Fontana. p. 142.

<sup>27</sup> Data received from online interviews with members of the V-tuber community (in possession of the author).



It started off as a character, but I eventually put in traits and parts of me into the character, so I consider them as my persona as of current.

(@lottiech\_, Non-Binary)

Felix is my online persona, which is basically like a better and ideal version of myself. A lot of his features and personality is mine but switched around to make him better than me. I also made his world and lore highly referencing on previous experiences, but in a cyberpunk fictional world.

(@FelixBorealis, Male)

From this, we can explore the presence of identity play in the community, like role-playing games and message boards, but amplified as practitioners can self-modify how they are physically perceived at an almost instantaneous rate; the character is built to reflect a persona that is not the true self of the actor but an act; a hybrid identity<sup>28</sup>. It reaffirms Goffman's notion of the performative identity; in an online space we are given new social contexts that lead to new performances<sup>29</sup>. As mentioned by the third answer, these personalities are also drawing upon earlier works of popular culture such as cyberpunk, itself iterating upon other works to create something new. These personalities also allow for their actors to challenge societal interpellation of themselves as gendered characters, as real or fictional entities that can think and feel.

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<sup>28</sup> Koosel, S.

<sup>29</sup> Goffman, E.

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