

Grace Kingston

Bachelor of Fine Arts (hons), 3164777

Supervisor: Associate Professor Paul Thomas

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## Grace +

Identifying and Exploring the Nature of Online Identities as Expressed through the Platform of Social Networking Sites.



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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a series of explorations and comparisons of the corporeal and digital self; sites both real and virtual. The written and studio practice has come into being after a sustained artistic inquiry in to social media as phenomena. My work focuses on what the definition of self may be in a time where our presences and interactions are increasingly digital. I seek to compare how identity is presented and shaped for the purpose of mimetic display, through strategies of physical body modification and online representation. Specifically this thesis focuses on posthumanist relationships to a reconfiguring of the human body in juxtaposition to the mediated online body constructed of personal information in the creation of an online profile.

I will employ the themes of translations and actants found in actor-network theory (ANT) to exploit this duality in the creation of my studio work. My thesis is based on a written and practical component:

- The more abstract avenues of social network sites and activities will be explored through my written work, with a focus on how the nature of self-directed identity shaping is translated to online platforms
- My practice led research sets out to reverse translation, by creating a metaphorical representation of embodied restraints and online nodal spaces for the purpose of exploring what it means to mediate within online social networks.

This thesis will first present the differences between notions of self and interactions with others online in contrast with their real world counterparts. Secondly, there will be a discussion of the history of contemporary body modification in regard to the reasoning, symbolism and cultural implications of these practices. The final chapter knits together these differing concepts of personal representation and identification – I will link additions to corporeal bodies with the construction of a user profile on a social networking site and discuss the hybrid notion identity this presents.

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## Introduction

This thesis is a series of explorations and comparisons between corporeality and the digital self; sites both real and virtual. It has come into being after a sustained artistic inquiry into social media as phenomena with potentially identity-creating extensions for its users, leading to research into the strategies and rituals of self-expression in this newly disembodied environment. Previously my work has focused on the body as a site of artistic, political and ideological expression, specifically in regard to identity play. In works and exhibitions such as *Transcendent Flesh – Sequential Selves/120daysoftweets*, I explore how individuals pierce, dye, tattoo, implant, reveal and conceal their bodies as a means of self-expression and ultimately identity creation. These explorations have had a dual focus: particularly in my work in painting I have sought to not only explore the bodily tactics of my subjects, but also reveal the ways artistic representative methods inform as well as draw from such strategies of embodied self-expression.

With the onset of social networking platforms as perhaps *the* new site of self-expression and social interaction, I have shifted my artistic focus to this new medium. As such, through my honours I have explored the platform of *Twitter*, while the first half of my MFA focused on *Facebook* as a site of investigation. At the time of writing I am following the evolution of social networking experiments, including the most recent, *Google+*: it is the newest commercial social networking site (SNS) to be open to a global public, and directly rivals both *Twitter* and *Facebook* in design. These sites hold a specific fascination for me due to my previous investigations into embodied methods of identity exploration, specifically because they remove the body and embodied experience from the equation.

Consequently, my work focuses on what the definition of 'self' may be in a time where our presences and interactions are increasingly digital. I seek to explore how identity is presented and shaped for the purpose of mimetic display, in particular comparing strategies of physical body modification and those of online virtual modifications. Hence, this thesis focuses on *posthumanist* relationships to, firstly, a reconfiguring of the human body through such technologies as prosthetics and cosmetic enhancement, and in juxtaposition, the mediated online body constructed of personal information in the creation of an online profile and associated SNS functions. I will employ the themes of *translations* and *actants* found in actor-network theory (ANT)<sup>1</sup> to exploit this duality in the creation of my studio work.

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<sup>1</sup> Law, J, Hassard, J. *Actor Network Theory and After*. International: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999. Print.

<sup>2</sup> To set up a user profile, and interact with other users profiles within the context of a social networking site's

The project's name Grace+ is a parody of the dual roots of this thesis, referring to both social networks as the site of investigation, and posthumanist discourse as the means of investigation. The title is taken from Google+, the aforementioned SNS, and Humanity+ (also known as H+) the web-based quarterly publication chaired by prominent Transhumanist Natasha Vita-More. While the first edition of H+ was published in 2008, before the conception of Google+, they bear no official relation to each other. However, the '+' addendum implies some interestingly corresponding implications in regard to the expansion of what we consider 'self'.

My thesis, is based on both a written and a practical component: my written work looks at social networking, focusing on how the nature of self-directed identity shaping is translated to online platforms, while my practice led research sets out to reverse translation, by creating a metaphorical representation of an online 'space' in physical space for the purpose of exploring what it means to interact within these sites.<sup>2</sup> While this work may not initially present as one that resides within the traditional notions of the painting discipline, it has strong links to the theory of the discipline, and can be, as Mark Titmarsh describes, considered painting in the expanded field.

*"Painting and flatness are once again fully contentious. Contemporary painting has made the boundaries of the medium malleable' such that 'rather surprising things have come to be called painting'."<sup>3</sup>*

*"An expanded concept of painting has identifiable roots that thread back through abject art, installation art, minimalism, conceptualism, arte povera, fluxus, Rauschenberg, Pollock, Duchamp and Picasso. In the first decade of the twentieth century the balance between painting as an object and painting as an image began to tip... Duchamp pushed the extended modes of painterly production to an alogical extreme by abandoning all the craft skills associated with painting. By continuing to exhibit readymades as an extension of painting practice, and in the context of other paintings, Duchamp challenged the 'proper name' of painting".<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> To set up a user profile, and interact with other users profiles within the context of a social networking site's platform.

<sup>3</sup> Pg. 27. Titmarsh, M. *Shapes of Inhabitation: Painting in the Expanded Field*. Art Monthly Review Australia. Journal: Australia. May 2006

<sup>4</sup> Pg. 28. Ibid

Similar to the above-described practice of Duchamp, my practice led research employs the traditional drafting and compositional strategies that typify the discipline of painting/drawing. Yet moves outside of the canvas by creating a physically drafted interactive space in which the viewer becomes the subject, and the scene is framed within four walls rather than the four sides of a painting. Strong traces of painting remain evident in this space through the considered palette employed throughout the drafted scene. This is especially evident via is the trope of red throughout the objects and artworks created, as well as pure white featured on walls and ropes - the 'starting point' for the work, suggesting both a freshly primed canvas and the background of the Google subject matter.

The thesis will first present the differences between notions of self and social interactions online, in contrast with their real world counterparts. Secondly, I will discuss the history of contemporary body modification in regard to the reasoning, symbolism and cultural implications of these practices. This will help us to distinguish, as much as is possible, the corporeal from the virtual, and accordingly highlight the essential differences that are changing our ways of thinking and being as we step into a digital era. The final chapter knits together these differing concepts of personal representation and identification. I will link additions to corporeal bodies with the construction of a user profile on a social networking site and discuss the hybrid notion of identity this presents.

My practice led research will discuss these themes through a series of Drawings, Photographs and knotted-rope-site-specific installations reminiscent of Duchamps *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942) [surrealist exhibition]. I aim to physically create links, networks, highways, circuits, avenues and detours analogous to social networks. The work presents a posthuman mediated concept via physically constructed networks, where knots are *actants* with the aim of locating where the mediated body fits within the rest of the network, if a 'body' can be separated from the network at all.

## Grace + – The move from physical to online relations

*“When part of your life is lived in virtual places... a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is ‘true here’, true in a simulation. In games where we expect to play an avatar, we end up being ourselves in the most revealing ways; on social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else – often the fantasy of who we want to be. Distinctions blur.”<sup>5</sup>*

### *A/S/L - Who am I? Who are you?*

In their most basic form, social relations are interactions between one’s self and others. Traditionally the spaces in which we socialise have been physical, accordingly our social expressivity has traditionally been determined by our embodied condition – that is, our bodies. In recent years, social interaction has in part moved to online realms that seek to imitate these real-life places – social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and more recently, *Google+*. This chapter focuses on the contextualised and social online self, explaining how the difference between “real” or corporeal space and online space leads to changing social relations, thus a changing view of self.

This chapter breaks down the fundamentals of identity construction by discussing the origins of online presences and the specific tools employed by users on social networking sites, such as profile pictures, status updates and ‘likes’ or ‘+1’s’. I will focus heavily on the psychological research undertaken by Sherry Turkle into online life and social networking, as Turkle is the most relevant academic of note to have published in-depth research into the specifics of online social networking and its ramifications.

The existence of online communities is not, in fact, so new. Some academics, like Turkle, have had their research for the past few decades substantiated from first hand interviews with individuals active in virtual spaces. These online communities consisted of chat rooms that were originally known as MUDs<sup>6</sup> (Multi-User Dungeons: dungeons in this case is a synonym for ‘space’ from the popular role playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*), which emerged in the late 70’s to early 80’s and were text-based, online, role-playing

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<sup>5</sup> Pg. 153 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>6</sup> There are also various other explanations for the MUD acronym: such as Multi-User Dimension and Multi-User Domain. MUD’s can also be referred to as MUSH: Multi-User Shared Hallucination, Multi-User Shared Hack, Multi-User Shared Habitat and Multi-User Shared Holodeck.

games. The important distinction here is that these are games where people are playing characters, not an attempt at depiction of our 'real selves'. Consequently, they do not attempt to mimic the social interactions of the offline environment, but rather imitate the narrative and linguistic traditions of fantasy and sci-fi literature. For this reason, MUDs, MOOs (Multi-User Object Oriented dungeon), and their contemporary counterparts MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online game) are not within the scope of this paper.

However, it is important to recognise that due to their historical imminence as the first instance of collaborative virtual environments, MUDs have informed the design and implementation of contemporary SNSs, and thereby their user interfaces and experiences. As we will see, the resemblance between these two processes of sustained authorship are perhaps greater than on first encounter, and can reveal more than we anticipate.

*"... Identity work can take place wherever you create an avatar. And it can take place on social networking sites as well, where one's profile becomes an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be... They all ask you to compose and project an identity... [An interviewed girl] calls her Facebook profile 'my internet twin' and 'the avatar of me'."*<sup>7</sup>

Naturally, there are often strong links between a user and their profile or avatar, yet I have found in my artistic work on Grace+ that creating a context that conceptualises both can present a challenge. This is because while the location of self in contemporary *Gesellschaft*<sup>8</sup> seems, at first, self-evident in nature – we feel we can readily identify selfhood – there is a multiplicity of representation that occurs through our increasing reliance on technology and online interaction, which has left notions of 'self' more obscure.

Originally, our only representations beyond face-to-face, has been graphic depictions or written communication which were static in nature, such as diaries, letters, portraits etc. That is to say, once penned and presented, these representations were landmarks, that when placed together, create a physical timeline of evidence that are hermetic within the analog construction. Assuming no further evidence presents itself, a static portrait of an individual is created. Accordingly, the point at which traditional and online interactions most significantly diverge is through the potential to reengineer that which new technologies exhibit. This

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<sup>7</sup> Pg. 180 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>8</sup> The terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* were introduced by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 and roughly translate respectively to community (traditional collections of people like villagers or tribes) and society (wider networks like work places where the individuals self-interest, in opposition to the community at large, is primary).

infinite capacity to update – edit, step backward or forward a version, remix, etc. – enables the constant revolution of represented identities.

### *From Face-to-Face, to Screen-to-Screen*

Before an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon it must first be defined. In this case, the term *updating* is used not only to describe the addition of information, but also subtractions and re-defining. Specifically in regard to user profiles on online social networking sites, the term *update* is generally understood in reference to a status update or a profile picture update. This usage of the term is generally understood as adding a new piece of information, while the old piece is stored within the profile. However this thesis will employ the technical use of the term, that is, any change whatsoever, whether performed by the user, administrator or even those changes triggered by the algorithms that determine much of a website's interactions with its users, may be considered an "update". We will focus particularly on those updates that can be carried out by the user and that are directly connected to their profile page, as our interest lies primarily in the identity-creating tactics of individuals.

Of particular interest in this case are subtractions and omissions; this is where the importance of the update in relation to identity construction can be best understood. While they say on the Internet, nothing is ever really 'gone', it can certainly be cleverly disguised. Due to the mutable nature of an online platform, users can (and do) re-write their visible history on their profile. A user can in a few clicks, remove or un-tag themselves from photos, delete status updates, change and hide personal information to erase all evidence of an ex-lover, a previous career, lifestyle or anything else that they may want to disassociate from. The real-world correlation would be along the lines of throwing out photos and moving to a new city, but that takes a significant amount of time, money and effort. The serious identity play that takes place in online forums can be achieved in one afternoon, in different and conflicting ways on different sites, over and over. Hayles more abstract discussion of locating self amongst technology can be aptly applied here:

*"Each agent runs a modular program designed to accomplish a specific activity, operating relatively independent of others. Only when conflicts occur between agents does an adjudicating program kick in to resolve the problem. In this model, consciousness emerges as an epiphenomenon whose role it is*

*to tell a coherent story about what is happening, even though this story may have little to do with what is happening processurally.”<sup>9</sup>*

The consequences of these multifarious and self-consciously indexical selves present numerous issues, both online and in ‘real life’. Importantly, most expectations of honesty in interpersonal communications are lost, and generally, are no longer expected. The loss of these previously assumed expectations leads to a sort of iterative topological space of self-doubt within the self-imposed micro-communities, however acceptance of the macro-community of *Facebook* or *Google+* is taken as a given.

*“[One interviewer] talks about the ‘throwaway friendships’ of online life. [Another interviewer] wonders what she really has to show for the time she has spent hanging out with a small, sarcastic in-crowd and with a best friend who she fears will simply not show up again. It is hard to accept that online friends are not part of your life; yet, they can make themselves disappear just as you can make them vanish. [This leads to] Anxiety about [oneself and] Internet friendships.”<sup>10</sup>*

The users described here are far from abnormal, the infinite fluidity of virtual life breeds anxiety in its most loyal citizen. Our failure to cope testifies to the significant differences between pre and post internet-based social life. Part of this anxiety arises from the ever present issue of “authenticity” or “reality”: SNSs offer us a space of limited social expectations with which to interact, as we are not presented with the familiar feedback provided by the physical presence of others. This “no-consequences” setting arrives as “unreal” or “fictional”, essentially inviting us to play. In the case of avatars/user profiles on online social networking sites this often means playing at ourselves, testing out options and performing the self we would (currently) like to be.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Screen Theatre of You and I*

*“Every day [An interviewed girl] expresses herself through a group of virtual personae... Identity involves negotiation all of these and the physical [self].*

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<sup>9</sup> Pg. 157 Hayles, N.K. *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print. Quoted within quote is an excerpt from Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*.

<sup>10</sup> Pg. 275 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>11</sup> The “fictional” effect that these technologies exude accounts for the rise of the online RPG, and points to the twinship of SNSs and MMOs as essentially performative spaces.

*When identity is multiple in this way, people feel 'whole' not because they are one but because the relationships among aspects of self are fluid and undefensive. We feel 'ourselves' if we can move easily among our many aspects of self... in online life, the site supports the self... it can be hard to decide where to go online, because where [one] goes means stepping into who [one] is in any given place, and in different places, [one] has different pastimes and different friends... the 'life mix' refers to more than combing a virtual life with a physically embodied one."<sup>12</sup>*

The elements of performance within our various lives are as clear as the motivations to construct them in the first place. Our movement from one profile to another can be seen as a kind of online locomotor play in which various experiments are tested through adjustments of volunteered information via updating. While performing in this production, like any other production, a form of costume is needed, the most obvious item being one's profile picture.

Profile pictures are the most significant point of contact for other users when viewing your profile, "*The site feature that attracted most attention on Klout, Facebook and StumbleUpon was the profile photo*"<sup>13</sup>, the next being your latest status update, followed by your personal information (job title, school, relationship status, 'likes' etc)<sup>14</sup>. And while there are a few people who use cartoons or graphics, the vast majority of people use a photo of themselves as their profile picture. For some, it depicts a personal feat like winning a medal, getting dressed up, or visiting an overseas country. For others who aim to create a bit of mystery it is cropped, depicting only a small part of their body, like an eye or shoes. And for many more, their pictures are literally doctored via Photoshop, using filters like Instagram or using online software like SlimPic before being uploaded. All are a fantastical re-imagination of ourselves in one way or another, that again, often have real-life repercussions.

*"Social media ask us to represent ourselves in simplified ways. And then, faced with an audience, we feel pressure to conform to these simplifications. On Facebook, [An interviewed boy] represents himself as cool and in the know... He spends more and more time perfecting his online Mr. Cool. And he feels pressure to perform him...."*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pg. 194-195, Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> As proven in by EyeTrackShop, a company that runs eye-tracking studies for advertisers: *Here's How People Look at Your Facebook Profile – Literally*, [http://mashable.com/2011/11/30/social-profile-eye-tracking/#view\\_as\\_one\\_page-gallery\\_box3273](http://mashable.com/2011/11/30/social-profile-eye-tracking/#view_as_one_page-gallery_box3273), Mashable.com, Pub. 01 Dec 2011. n.d. Web. 13 Dec 2011

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Pg. 185 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

The assemblage continues through the practice of status updates touched on earlier. Where profile pictures can be seen as online costumes, status updates might be seen as scripts. Without the immediacy of a face-to-face conversation there is time for composure and reflection, *“Whenever one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The ‘real me’ turns out to be elusive”*<sup>16</sup>. Status updates are questions or comments added to your profile, and in turn to the general discourse of the SNS. They act as the most transparent source of identity shaping, as they are direct quotes from you.

Slightly more insidious as a cultural marker, are ‘likes’ or ‘+1’s’. A user can use the ‘like’ button to support any ‘page’ on the *Facebook* site, pages belong to bands, artists, venues or celebrities and are created by the artists, fans or employees of said pages. Likewise one can ‘+1’ any website, link or comment made by another user on *Google+*. To ‘like’ or ‘+1’ means simply to click an icon below the status or at the top of a ‘page’ to show approval without having to explain via comments, or manually enter information. They also act as hyperlinks that lead to further information in case another user is curious. Unlike the quote-like quality of the status update, or the factual elements of the rest of one’s user information, all of which point back to the user, saying something about what/who they are, ‘likes’ and ‘+1’s’ act as charms or badges for the user. Almost like wearing a brand name, they point away from the user, acting as a strategic representation of the user’s greater network. The ‘wearing’ of one associates the user with pre-supposed characteristics due to their chosen placement in the greater social network, without the user having to directly state or exhibit such qualities.

*“[An interviewed boy states] You get reduced to a list of favourite things... I look at someone’s profile and I say ‘Oh, they like these bands.’ I’m like ‘Oh, they’re a poser,’ or ‘they’re really deep, and they’re into good music.’ We all do that, I think. And then I think it doesn’t matter, but... the thing is, in the world of Facebook it does matter. Those minute details do matter”*<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, those minute details do matter, and not just to the users ‘friends’, but often to the growing number of employers and colleges that use the site as a way to ‘screen’ potential employees and students. The majority of young people are becoming aware of this, and many will set up increased security or even fake profiles to counteract these impositions into

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<sup>16</sup> Pg. 180, Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Pg. 185 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

their personal public life. The blurred boundaries of privacy that social networking sites offer has led to a consensus that there is next to none at all.

*“One seventeen-year-old, ‘scrubbing’ her Facebook account under the orders of her high school guidance counsellor (concerned about compromising photographs that should be removed before the college admissions process), is convinced that anyone with enough time and money can find a way onto her Facebook page without her permission.”<sup>18</sup>*

The feeling of constantly (potentially) being in the spotlight amongst spaces like *Facebook* and *Google+* that claim to be there for socialising purposes, serves as further evidence that SNSs promote an atmosphere of play and performance. Rather than simply engaging in sites that promote ‘connectivity’, these are spaces where our online self/ves and online ‘bodies’ act as sites of mimetic display for an unknown everyone. Social networking sites are thus quite true to their lineage, the MUDs of the 80’s, they too inspire self-recreation in their users as we filter ourselves through lenses of fantasy and imagination. It is interesting to note from our discussion, that the performative nature of social networking spaces is contributed to simultaneously by their “fiction-like/zero-consequence” qualities, as well as their status as a public platform, drawing a surprising connection between our conceptual understanding of public figures and fictional worlds.

The assemblage of cultural references to create a more idealised, or publicly communicative, self-authored picture of ‘self’, have their origins in ancient body modification rituals. Modifications like tattoos, piercing, burning, and scarring etc hold varied and deep symbolic significances. While the audiences of said bodies were those of a *Gemeinschaft*<sup>19</sup> originally, contemporary body modification practices (henceforth known as ‘bodymod’ to distinguish) are now largely globalised. This is due in part to their online promotion through traditional social media sites, and largely through social sites of their own like BMEzine.com. All contemporary bodymod has its roots in ancient practices, but the meanings of these practices have shifted significantly. Like the composition of a user profile on *Facebook* or *Google+*, the bodymod of today are a series of carefully placed symbolic flags. When accumulated, these flags can read as a narrative, an individual’s autobiography. A thorough

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<sup>18</sup> Pg. 254 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>19</sup> The terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* were introduced by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 and roughly translate respectively to community (traditional collections of people like villagers or tribes) and society (wider networks like work places where the individuals self-interest, in opposition to the community at large, is primary).

explanation of these practices and their cultural implications can be found in the next chapter.

## **+ – Additions to the corporeal bodies and their digital counterparts.**

*“The denaturing process of technoscience, the shifting of the body past presumed ‘natural’ constraints, can be seen to make literal postmodernism’s celebrated deconstruction of the subject... The un-making of modern identity into multiple postmodern possibilities parallels posthuman visions of cyborgian freedom and limitlessness... these issues are increasingly pressing as high technology, which now includes cyberspace, information technology, virtual imaging, virtual reality, and biomedical methods of body reconstruction, is rapidly influencing the ways we inscribe our bodies and narrate our identities... All facets of the body modification community identify the body as a space of self-writing.”<sup>20</sup>*

### *A Brief History of Contemporary Body Modification*

Present-day body modification has a genesis as varied and diverse as the indigenous practices that they originated from. Traditionally modification like scarring, tattooing or piercing was used for status identification in tribal culture. Specifically, changes were made to symbolise coming of age, marriage, familial clan and ones social position within said clan. While recent practices differ, the objective is the same. That is, to identify in a symbolic and irreversibly physical way with whom we believe ourselves to be (or more cynically, who we’d like others to see us as). Traditional body modifications are exceptionally heterogeneous and historically prodigious and have been thoroughly documented within the social sciences,<sup>21</sup> therefore this chapter will mainly focus on the current praxis.

To begin a discussion of contemporary bodymod, this chapter will outline a brief history of ‘commonly-known-as’ modification practices, that is, actions that are taken for adorning and subversive reasons such as tattoos, piercings, brandings. We will also focus on some of the key players who have made the movement what it is today. In addition, we will undertake a brief discussion of modifications not generally considered ‘bodymod’, that is, actions undertaken for ‘normalising’ reasons, such as breast enhancement or facelifts. Finally, we will explore the cultural implications of these practices, as well as, where the posthuman

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<sup>20</sup> Pg. 152-153. Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

<sup>21</sup> DeMello, M. *Bodies of inscription: a cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. North Carolina: Duke University Press. 2000. Print.

Gilbert, S. *Tattoo history: a source book: an anthology of historical records of tattooing throughout the world*. California: Juno books/University of California. 2000. Print.

Rubin, A. *Marks of civilization: artistic transformations of the human body*. California: Museum of California, Los Angeles. 1988. Print.

cyborg can be located amongst it. In all stages of this investigation, it is clear that the idea of 'body' can no longer be considered exclusively the flesh one was born with. Victoria Pitt's asserts that the idea of a singular physical body is in the process of being revised.

*"... A classical idea of the skin [is of] a pristine, smooth, closed envelope for the self, and a notion of the body and self as fixed and unchanging. These notions were inherited from Enlightenment traditions that are undergoing major revision by contemporary theorists... [and] is replaced by a sense that both are culturally shaped and socially ordered."<sup>22</sup>*

Like many of present-day customs in the west, bodymod takes its roots in colonialism. It is widely acknowledged that European sailors, returned from voyages to eastern nations, are one of the key elements to the resurgence of body modification in the 'west'.<sup>23</sup> Like the indigenous people this practice was appropriated from, sailor's preferred images and symbols that acted as chapters in a visual autobiography: images related to their crew, family or destinations were often depicted.<sup>24</sup> Yet the crucial difference between traditional tattoos and those of the sailors lies in their autonomy. While, say, a Maori facial tattoo told a person's story through symbols, these symbols were a readable language and were only permitted on an individual once 'earned'.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the sailors as a whole had relatively full discretion to place any mark on their own body, which may have held significance to the individual, but did not have any formal societal structure, even if they were replicas of tribal designs.<sup>26</sup> Exercising this kind of autonomy provides the distinction between cultural contexts: it acts as the turning point from traditional application, to sub-cultural movement.

As well as sailors, criminals and carnival folk were the crucial groups of people to develop the contemporary tattooing practice in the west throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Pg. 25-26. Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

<sup>23</sup> DeMello, M. *Bodies of inscription: a cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. North Carolina: Duke University Press. 2000. Print.

Gilbert, S. *Tattoo history: a source book: an anthology of historical records of tattooing throughout the world*. California: Juno books/University of California. 2000. Print.

Rubin, A. *Marks of civilization: artistic transformations of the human body*. California: Museum of California, Los Angeles. 1988. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Pg. 20. Couper, A. D. *Sailors and traders: a maritime history of the Pacific peoples*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press. 2009. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Pg. 137 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Henk Schiffmacher a.k.a Hanky Panky

<sup>26</sup> *"Without my parents or family's knowledge, I had gone to Western Samoa to get the traditional body tattoo, the pe'a. In the olden days your family had to agree before you get a pe'a, or evil days would fall on your house. I don't believe in superstitions and anyway my family always said 'no' every year I asked them."* Pg. 117. 137 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Lyle Tuttle

centuries.<sup>27</sup> Due to the low-income status of these groups, the style that evolved was in general, crude and scratchy. This style was eventually given a name: *Flash*. Now a staple in almost every tattoo parlour in the world, 'Flash Art' are small, pre-designed images available for anyone who walks in to a tattoo studio to pick out. Amongst the most popular of the Flash style is the infamous love-heart with banner ('mom' being the most iconic) along with skulls, daggers, snakes and, of course, anchors.

It wasn't until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the practice of tattooing began to enter the mainstream, thanks to Punk, and other countercultural movements.<sup>28</sup> It is around this time that piercing emerged in a more conspicuous fashion as well. One subculture that particularly aided the revival of piercing was the gay community, the 1960's, gay men would signify to one another their sexuality by wearing a piercing in their right ear.<sup>29</sup> While ear piercing, on women in particular, has been fashionable for centuries, this was the first instance in the west of piercings being used for their symbolic status value. It also marks the beginning of bodymod for use as *Flagging*,<sup>30</sup> where type of modification and placement on the body indicates an emblematic alliance of an individual with a likeminded group. Since bodymod's revival, it has grown in to a subculture of its own, therefore the act of modifications itself has *become* the group.

*"They're searching as we certainly all have been for identity – to affirm existence. We don't believe in an afterlife or God or gods, so how do we affirm our existence while we're here? ...Fight, flight and ecstasy are the three things. Those are all combined in piercings and tattoos and the marking of your passage through life and the idea of it being a visual, permanent library of experiences that cannot be taken from you except by death."<sup>31</sup>*

Of this revival, have been innumerable individuals who have added to the culture and practices of bodymod as a whole, however there are some who have been particularly instrumental in their contributions to contemporary bodymod. Practitioners like Fakir Musafar, Don Ed Hardy, Hanky Panky, Genesis P-Orridge and Jim Ward were some of the

<sup>27</sup>Pg. 5. DeMello, M. *Encyclopaedia of body adornment*. California: ABC-CLIO. 2007. Print

<sup>28</sup> Pg. ii. DeMello, M. *Bodies of Inscription: a Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. North Carolina: Duke University Press. 2000. Print.

<sup>29</sup> 'Gay' <http://wiki.bmezine.com/index.php/Gay> . BMEzine, n.d. Web. 10 Aug 2011

<sup>30</sup> *Flagging*: a practice of displaying a colour-coded hanky relating to specific sexual interests in ones left or right back pocket or on a belt. Flagging originated in gay men's clubs in the 1970's, and is now practiced by the wider LGBTI community, although scarcely. Left placements of body mods symbolise the 'dominant' or penetrative partner, and right placements to indicate the 'submissive' or receptive partner.

<sup>31</sup> Pg. 178 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Neil Andrew Megson a.k.a Genesis P-Orridge

first to push the limits of bodies for aesthetic and sensory reasons. In particular, the aberrant Fakir Musafar can be said to be the earliest innovator of present-day modification and body-play.

Born in 1930, Musafar has devoted his entire life to body-play, embarking on his first experiments with piercing and restriction in secret as an early adolescent, after being inspired by encyclopaedias and national geographic.<sup>32</sup> Born with the name Roland Loomis, he adopted the name Fakir Musafar from an early *Ripley's Believe it or Not* feature on a 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian Sufi of the same name, who travelled for 18 years with daggers, locks and mirrors sewn and pierced into his skin. Musafar chose to assume the name in the 1970's after he moved to California to "[come] out of the closet"<sup>33</sup> as being a bodymod enthusiast. Musafar has experimented with almost every possible modification, temporary and permanent. Including but not limited to piercing, tattooing, scarification, stretching, branding, corsetry, suspension, gilding (covering the body in a thin layer of gold) as well as carnival tricks like the bed of nails and sword swallowing.<sup>34</sup> He has characterised any body-play as falling under one of seven categories:

1. **Body Play by Contortion: "Bending Bones", "Distention":** *Gymnastics, contortionism, Yoga exercises and Hindu practices of Sadhus, the "Scavenger's Daughter", enlargement of piercings, cupping, high-heel shoes, foot-binding, stretching part of the body etc.*
2. **Body Play by Constriction: "Compression":** *Bondage, tight ligatures and belts, corsets, tight clothing (like rubber or denim), cords, body presses, etc.*
3. **Body Play by Deprivation: "Shut-Off", "Frozen":** *Fasting, sleep deprivation, fatigue, restriction of movement, sense isolation in boxes, cages, helmets, body suits, bags etc.*
4. **Body Play by Encumberment: "Wearing Iron":** *Heavy bracelets, anklets, neck ornamentation, footwear, manacles, encasements, chains etc.*
5. **Body Play by Fire: "Burn-Out":** *Sun tanning, electricity (constant and shock), steam/heat baths and boxes, the "pack", branding and burning, as in the Japanese "Okyu"<sup>35</sup> treatment, etc.*

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<sup>32</sup> Pg. 10 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Roland Loomis a.k.a Fakir Musafar

<sup>33</sup> 'Fakir Musafar' <http://news.bmezine.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/pubring/people/A10101/fakir2.html> . BMEzine, n.d. Web. 10 Jan 2012

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Japanese needle practice similar to acupuncture.

6. **Body Play by Penetration: “Invasion”:** *Flagellation, being pierced, punctured, spiked or skewered, tattooing, bed of nails, bed of swords, irritants like hair, cloth or chemical agents, etc.*
7. **Body Play by Suspension: “Hung-Up”:** *Hung on a cross, the “witches’ cradle”, suspended by wrists, thighs, waist, ankles or flesh hooks, suspended by constrictions or multiple piercings etc.*<sup>36</sup>

Despite being penned in 1989, this list is still fairly exhaustive and comprises of the basis for all contemporary bodymod, (with the possible exception of implants, although that could fall under ‘Penetration/Invasion’). Much of the developments that took modification from the Musafars’ experiments and transformed them into contemporary bodymod were due to Musafars colleagues: Don Ed Hardy and Jim Ward.

Like Musafar, Don Ed Hardy (b. 1945) had an interest in bodymod from a young age, while in Primary school; Hardy would ‘colour-in’ tattoos on his peers, setting up a ‘studio’ in his basement.<sup>37</sup> After graduating from high school, Hardy received a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and began pursuing a more focused interest in tattooing by studying under Sailor Jerry Collins, famed for specialising in the aforementioned flash style of tattooing.<sup>38</sup> Hardy travelled to Japan in 1973 to learn about more traditional approaches as a way to broaden and develop his own distinctive style.<sup>39</sup> Much of the evolution from flash to contemporary tattooing is owed to Hardy’s’ pioneering work in the field.

*“[When I began tattooing] nobody was doing really big work; that didn’t exist in our society. I had seen a lot of historic photos of people tattooed all over, but always with big sections of tattoo shop flash more or less randomly applied. These people had had to fit their individual psyche into pre-congealed images that were often very out-of-date, because of the generally low level of artistry available... I was thinking ‘I’ll have to create an entirely new situation’”*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pg. 15 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Roland Loomis a.k.a Fakir Musafar

<sup>37</sup> Pg. 56. Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Pg. 54. Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Pg. 58-59. Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Pg. 52 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Don Ed Hardy

Where Hardy spearheaded contemporary tattooing, it was Jim Ward who launched contemporary piercing by developing types of tools and jewellery that are now considered standard in body piercing. Ward started his small business *Gauntlet* in 1975 from home and began experimenting under the tutelage of Richard Simonton (a.k.a. Doug Malloy), a Hollywood promoter and underground piercing enthusiast.<sup>41</sup> It was through Malloy's connection that Ward began corresponding and collaborating with piercer Alan Oversby (a.k.a. Mr Sebastian) in Amsterdam.<sup>42</sup> All parties had the commonality of the Gay Leather scene (Although Malloy, with a wife and four kids, claims to be an associate, not a partaker), and due to this association, European and United States piercing developed at much the same rate.<sup>43</sup> Eventually in 1977 Ward also started his own publication *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* (PFIQ) to continue to promote this global collaboration.<sup>44</sup> Before Ward's developments, body piercings were being attempted with jewellery and equipment meant for ear piercings, such piercings were obviously prone to infection and rejection.<sup>45</sup> Therefore Ward can be credited with taking piercing from 'play' to 'permanent' adornment.<sup>46</sup>

### *Contemporary Effects and Implications*

One of the most influential turning points in the transformation of bodymod from simply adornment to cultural movement was when Ward and Musafar attempted the *Sundance* and *O-Kee-Pa*, Native American religious ceremonies involving piercing and suspension, that were featured in Charles Gatewood's cult-classic film *Dances Sacred and Profane* (1985).<sup>47</sup> This action became one of the original instances of cultural appropriation that would go on to spur the problematically named *Modern Primitives* (MP) movement. While Musafar claims to have conceived the term in 1967,<sup>48</sup> its use only gained momentum in the 1980's and continues to a lesser degree today to describe a non-indigenous person adopting a traditional cultural practice to which they have no affiliation.<sup>49</sup> The name is problematic not

<sup>41</sup> Pg.160. Ibid. Quoted: Jim Ward.

<sup>42</sup> Pg. 162-163. Ibid. Quoted: Jim Ward.

<sup>43</sup> Ward, J. *In the beginning there was Gauntlet*. <http://news.bmezone.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/pubring/jimward/20040123.html>. BMEzone. 2004. Web. 10 Jan 2012

<sup>44</sup> Pg. 160-161 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Jim Ward.

<sup>45</sup> Ward, J. *The Beginnings of the Modern Body Piercing Movement*. <http://news.bmezone.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/pubring/jimward/20031111.html>. BMEzone, 2003. Web. 10 Jan 2012

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Jury, D. *Jury, M. Dances Sacred and profane*. 1985. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087117/>. Internet Movie Database. Web. 10 Jan 2012

<sup>48</sup> "Modern primitive is a term I thought I had coined in 1967 when I met Bud 'Viking' Navarro and Zapata in Los Angeles. We used the term to describe a non-tribal person who responds to primal urges and does something with the body" Pg. 13 Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1989. Print. Quoted: Roland Loomis a.k.a Fakir Musafar

<sup>49</sup> Pg. 119. Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

only in the use of the term 'primitive' to describe traditional cultures, but also continues to purport hierarchical binaries between the 'exotic Others' and 'advanced' Westerners.

*"In large part white urbanites enacting the traditional body practices of native cultures, modern primitives invert hierarchies of ethnicity by valorising the 'primitive' as politically, culturally, and spiritually superior... [However, the movement has been controversial] DeMello's criticisms are directed largely at the class problems modern primitivism poses."<sup>50</sup>*

Interestingly, while Pitt's wrote this less than a decade ago, the trend has already in the last few years come full circle. While some modern primitive trends still persist, like earlobe stretching and suspensions, the trend towards tribal tattooing has largely been eclipsed by 'vintage'<sup>51</sup> fashions which have seen the aforementioned *Flash* style make a come-back.<sup>52</sup> Similar to the MP's, the motivation behind this kind of sentimentality about past societies and people is due to the increasing feeling of homogeneity that a contemporary globalised world presents to us. Therefore, the present-day sees bodymod as an almost necessary ritual for people of all ages (though particularly younger people) to help foster our sense of individuality, and is a legitimate response to a post-modern, globally accessible age where little is private and everything has been 'done before':

*"The transformation of the body, in this view [as Giddens argues], often reflects such a narrative project of the self, and bodies are read as surfaces that display one's identity to others. Following Giddens and Shilling, then, instead of revealing "personality disorder and a propensity to crime", as the psychopathological and criminological theories would read them, body marking might be understood as a "process of expression and reception" of meaning or a "form of self-determination within a postmodern cultural context."<sup>53</sup>*

The expression and reception element of bodymod is essential to its understanding, and is clearly analogous with the aforementioned practice of flagging. However, while most bodymod, like flagging, conveys specific meaning to appeal to particular subcultures, there

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<sup>50</sup> Pg. 126-128. Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> C, Clerk. *Vintage tattoos: a sourcebook for old-school designs and tattoo artists*. California: Carlton/University of California. 2008. Print.

<sup>52</sup> Vogue Australia. *Club Vogue Lookbooks – Tattoos*. <http://www.vogue.com.au/club+vogue/lookbooks/tattoos,4665?pos=0#top>. 8 March 2010. Web. 10 Jan 2012

<sup>53</sup> Pg. 31. Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

are also more 'normalising' bodymod procedures that are conversely undertaken to appeal to a greater 'norm'. Procedures like breast enlargement, Botox injections, laser hair removal, liposuction, hair and nail colouring and teeth whitening etc., might be seen as reacting to the homogeneity of global culture through a movement towards conformity, in strong contrast to bodymod practices. Like subversive bodymod, cosmetic bodymod can range from relatively painless to highly invasive, yet cosmetic bodymod is rarely undertaken with the same pride and ritualism, but rather is often hidden and treated as shameful when uncovered. The only notable exceptions being infamous Hollywood celebrities like Jocelyn Wildenstein and Joan Rivers, as well as the equally infamous French artist Orlan's famous series of plastic surgery performances in the 90's.<sup>54</sup>

Few people celebrate, or even admit to cosmetic modifications for obvious reasons: even once a 'problem' is 'taken care of' is still admitting to a 'deficiency'. It is also a highly gendered practice, for despite the fact that cosmetic procedures are becoming more common amongst men, it is still essentially targeted and undertaken by women, with women accounting for 90% of the cosmetic surgery undertaken in the UK in 2011.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, it is also a racial issue, with eye-widening surgery common amongst a large number of western Asian people, while skin-bleaching lotions have been available over the counter globally for years.<sup>56</sup> It is for these reasons that feminists and cultural critics have discussed, at such length and for decades, cosmetic procedures and white patriarchal effects on body image. Regardless of this canon, cosmetic surgery continues to be on the rise, and beauty 'norms' move further away from what we were born with. Rivers describes this phenomenon and its patriarchal basis in her quintessentially tongue-in-cheek manner:

*"[What is] The massive appeal? Botox Cosmetic (or, as it's commonly called, Botox) is not like magic. Truly, it is magic. A chemical miracle. Wave a syringe, and all your worries (or at least the appearance of them) disappear."<sup>57</sup>*

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<sup>54</sup> Shérif's Block Surgery-Performance (1986), 1st Surgery-performance (1990), Surgery-Performance saif to the Unicorn (1990), Successful-Surgery (1990), Opera-Surgery (1991), Omnipresence-Surgery (1993), 9th Surgery-performance (1993). Orlan. Performance. <http://www.orlan.net/works/performance/> n.d. Web. 25 Jan 2012

<sup>55</sup> Rogers, S. *UK plastic surgery statistics: breasts up, stomachs in*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2012/jan/30/plastic-surgery-statistics-uk>. The Guardian. Web. 30 Jan 2012

<sup>56</sup> Hundal, S. *The Dark Side of Skin-Whitening Cream*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/01/skin-whitening-death-thailand>. The Guardian UK. 2010. Web. 10 Jan 2012

<sup>57</sup> Pg. 38. Rivers, J. Frankel, V. *Men Are Stupid . . . and They Like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty Through Plastic Surgery*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009. Print.

The most popular cosmetic surgeries and procedures are the most successful way to gage the dominant paradigm of western beauty at any given time. And given that said image keeps moving further away from what can be described as natural for any real person, despite its purpose of 'normalisation', the paradigm of what is considered a beautiful person starts to look a lot more like Baudrillard's Hyperreality.<sup>58</sup> As a result, when modification is being undertaken on our bodies to the point where they no longer resemble something that is able to be made organically, questions surrounding what it is to be 'real' and furthermore, what it is to be 'human' arise.

### *The Modified Body as it relates to the Posthuman Body*

*"...Post-human visions overlap with those of postmodernism... Postmodernism's insistence on denaturing and deconstructing identity means that the subject undergoes reconstruction, which could 'fundamentally alter what it means to be human'. The un-making of modern identity into multiple postmodern possibilities parallels post-human visions of cyborgian freedom and limitlessness; the postmodern/post-human subject is perceived to be freed from both modern and human constraints... The post-human vision excites, on the one hand, ideas of a liberal, post-ideological relativism in which the norm is one's individual freedom to choose a body and identity. It also inspires, on the other hand, critical, materialist, and feminist theories in which cyborgs become agents of social change by resisting or subverting forces of power."<sup>59</sup>*

The final frontier in bodymod is undoubtedly posthumanist philosophy. Though it is largely theoretical, in addition to being highly controversial, it is certainly not implausible as a vision of the future of humanity. Some theorists claim we are already posthuman, or cyborgs,<sup>60</sup> due to scientific enhancements like vaccines and pacemakers. However, the radical future picture of bodies unequivocally altered beyond recognition by science and technology that is painted by many posthumanists,<sup>61</sup> is more commonly found in science fiction, which has left many sceptical.<sup>62</sup> In addition, there is sense of uneasiness that

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<sup>58</sup> Baudrillard, J. *Simulacra and simulation*. English Translation. Michigan: University of Michigan Press. 1994. Print.

<sup>59</sup> Pg. 152. Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2003. Print.

<sup>60</sup> Savulescu, J. Bostrom, N. *Human enhancement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print

<sup>61</sup> Vita-More, N. deGrey, A. Tirosh-Samuels, H. Bostrom, B. et al.

<sup>62</sup> Pg. 406-407 Ed. Baillie, H. W. Casey, T. *Is Human Nature Obsolete?: Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition*. Boston: MIT press. 2005. Print.

posthumanism has received, largely due to the moral ambiguity that arises in a Judeo-Christian society when one is seen to be 'playing god'.

*"Due to genetic engineering, humans are now able not only to redesign themselves, presumably in order to get rid of various limitations, but also to redesign future generations, thereby affecting the evolutionary process itself... In the posthuman age, humans will no longer be controlled by nature; instead, they will be the controllers of nature. Those who welcome the posthuman phase are known as transhumanists."*<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, the kind of simultaneous reception of intrigue and repugnance transhumanists have received are similar to the response Anglo-Europeans had to Indigenous people during colonial times. However the Judeo-Christian ethical concerns are no longer simply an unwillingness to tamper with the aesthetic of the body,<sup>64</sup> as posthumanist theories propose we manipulate one of the fundamental aspects of humanness – aging and death. Transhumanists are governed by what is known as self-directed evolution,<sup>65</sup> and thus argue that eventually mortality need not be a rudimentary assumption, as deGrey puts it:

*"Ageing is a physical phenomenon happening to our bodies, so at some point in the future, as medicine becomes more and more powerful, we will inevitably be able to address ageing just as effectively as we address many diseases today."*<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, transhumanists see this desire to overcome nature-imposed obstacles as an inherent desire of humanity, and indeed part of what makes us human:

*"Ever since we [humans] invented fire and the wheel, we've been demonstrating both our ability and our inherent desire to fix things that we don't like about ourselves and our environment. We would be going against that most fundamental aspect of what it is to be human if we decided that*

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<sup>63</sup> Pgs. 19-20. Tirosch-Samuels, H. *H+/-: Transhumanism and Its Critics*. London: Xlibris Corporation, 2011. Print.

<sup>64</sup> Leviticus 19:28 "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD". *King James Bible (Cambridge addition)*, 2001. Print.

<sup>65</sup> Mann, S. Arkadiou, S, a.k.a Stelarc. *Cyborg Thinkers to Address Humanity's Future: Wearable computer inventor Steve Mann and performance artist Stelarc to keynote TransVision 2004 conference in Toronto*. [http://www.transhumanism.org/tv/2004/TV\\_2004\\_press\\_release\\_2.htm](http://www.transhumanism.org/tv/2004/TV_2004_press_release_2.htm). 2004. Web. 30 Jan 2012

<sup>66</sup> deGrey, A. *'We will be able to live to 1,000'*. 2004. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/4003063.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4003063.stm). BBC News. Web. May 4 2011

*something so horrible as everyone getting frail and decrepit and dependent was something we should live with forever.*<sup>67</sup>

Despite the moral concerns with many posthumanist philosophies, within the Arts there is a curiosity, not only about the theoretical potential of humans, but what this state would look like when realised. Natasha Vita-More outlines what she considers to be the three classic depictions of humans currently expressed in the arts: the classical image, the Cyborg, and the transcendent entity.<sup>68</sup> The classical image is based on the archetypal Greek and Roman artistic rendition of the figure seen in most historical works of art, such as those produced in the Renaissance.<sup>69</sup> The Cyborg is usually a clear fusion of man and machine, where the two are joined but their fusion is pronounced.<sup>70</sup> The transcendent entity is an ethereal form with an undefined corporeal identity, such as many religious figures or science-fiction/ psychoanalytical ideas of a collective consciousness of humans.<sup>71</sup> Vita-More has also proposed her own theory on a new aesthetic within a term she's coined as the *Primo Posthuman*.

*"This approach is a disciplined rationalism of the modernist's enlightenment of progress and naturalism, and the multi-perceptual character of post-modernism which opens up pathways to express humanity in novel forms. It is the hyper-modern approach of "Primo Posthuman," as a future body prototype, that combines design with biotechnology, resulting in a new symbol for artistic themes. Unlike the classical human form, Primo takes the ideal of "man" and incorporates it in its Transhumanist values of improving the human condition. Unlike the Cyborg, Primo's unfolding nature is based on expanding choices. Unlike the transcendent, Primo is driven by the rational rather than the mystical."*<sup>72</sup>

Coincidentally, *Primo* was conceived in 2004, the same year as Facebook launched in the United States, and a year after MySpace.<sup>73</sup> And many of the advantages *primo* offers compared with an organic human have been addressed and exploited in the creation of user

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<sup>67</sup> deGrey, A. 'We will be able to live to 1,000'. 2004. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/4003063.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4003063.stm). BBC News. Web. 4 August 2011

<sup>68</sup> Vita-More, N. *The New [human] Genre – Primo Posthuman*. <http://www.natasha.cc/paper.htm>. 2004. Web. 30 May 2011

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Vita-More, N. *The New [human] Genre – Primo Posthuman*. <http://www.natasha.cc/paper.htm>. 2004. Web. 30 May 2011

<sup>73</sup> Pg. 5. Roeder, L. *What is Myspace? Pros and Cons of Myspace*. [http://personalweb.about.com/od/myspacecom/a/whatismyspace\\_5.htm](http://personalweb.about.com/od/myspacecom/a/whatismyspace_5.htm). About.com. N.d. Web. 20 Jan 2012.

profiles and avatars in these domains, such as: Limited lifespan vs. Ageless; Legacy genes vs. Replaceable genes; Wears out vs. Upgrades; Gender restricted vs. Gender changeability; Prone to environmental damage vs. Impervious to environmental damage.<sup>74</sup> While social networking sites do not possess the embodiment of the theoretical *Primo*, they are certainly a lot more conceivable due to their low cost and potential for global access, they are therefore a lot more relevant in regard to worldwide social change.

Indeed, it has become clear throughout this investigation that addressing physical and online modified representations of self separately is no longer possible in the digital age. At this point it seems that the corporal and digital selves are competing for attention, instead we must consider them more holistically without attempting to marry the two. Since the onset of globalisation and the development of technology that allows us to be in different 'places' at different times, as different 'selves' we cannot simply deem identity as static or singular. We must look at identity both online and in the real as multifaceted and changeable, but ultimately moved by similar motivations. To do this we will review what is meant by the term 'identity' and the kind of stimulus provided by environments that shape this concept.

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<sup>74</sup> Vita-More, N. *The New [human] Genre – Primo Posthuman*. <http://www.natasha.cc/paper.htm>. 2004. Web. 30 May 2011

## **Equals – What juxtaposition between the virtual and the real implies in regard to a new identification of self**

*“Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation. They no longer have a referent in view, but a model... in all this, social meaning still flows between one pole and another, in a dialectical structure which allows for a political stake and contradictions... Bombarded with stimuli, messages and tests... it can no longer be a question of expression or representation, but only of the simulation of an ever inexpressible and unexpressed social.”<sup>75</sup>*

### *Summary of what is considered ‘self’ and ‘society’*

The mutable nature of ideas of self and identity are irrefutable, and can no longer be seen as static or singular. We have seen the extent to which modification is possible and in fact, a requirement of postmodernity. Throughout this investigation we have touched on the constant dialogue between self and other subjects, in other words socialisation in society at large. At this point, there needs to be a location of self within this network to fully grasp the individual contextually.

Baudrillard’s assessment of the social rejects fixed notions of self within society and establishes fluidity. In addition, we see Bruno Latour and John Law demonstrate through *Actor Network Theory* (ANT) the conceptual structure of society as not only one between self and its environments but as a material-semiotic mediation between self and concepts, a notion that will be discussed further later on in this chapter. To start to comprehend this we must look at the linking points between the *actants*<sup>76</sup> of self.

To begin with we may look at literal changes to our canvas, whether they are exhibited as transformations of an online profile or a physical body, both may be viewed as instances of updating. Many online processes have correlations to the processes of cosmetic changes

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<sup>75</sup> Pg. 20-21. Baudrillard, J. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities ...or The End of the Social and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University. Semiotext(e) Inc, 1983. Print.

<sup>76</sup> “The identity of an actant must be formally indexed to the attributes it can present when it enters into relations. Forming relations and inciting connections is the expression of a will-to-connect. This will-to-connect is the actant’s way of endeavouring to persist in being. That is, in one sense at least, ‘agency’. It is also what drives networks to incorporate and fold around actants. In themselves, though, actants are ‘functionally blank’. Their every presentation masks a more fundamental lack of presentation or failure immediately to signify. The unfolding of presentations, accompanied by this withdrawing from presentation, constitutes the essence of the actant. Such an essence is effectively a trajectory, a movement through successive presentations and relations” Pg. 41. Law, J, Hassard, J. *Actor Network Theory and After*. International: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999. Print.

that we impose on our physical body. There are several phenomena that are essentially interchangeable between these two, they include:

1. Profile picture – The art direction/concept of one's body, overall physical theme or 'look' e.g. tribal/modern primitive; tanned and Botox/Hollywood look.
2. Status update – An aesthetic 'quote' specific 'look' that is changeable e.g. Leopard print fake nails; statement jewellery; dyed hair.
3. 'Likes' or '+1' – Brand names/logos/specific allegiances e.g. Playboy bunny tattoo; Anarchist scarification piece.

The motivation for these amendments has previously been discussed in specifics, and deduced that they were holistically a response to the social, either to 'normalise' or subvert. Yet in a broader sense they are also reactions not only to the nature of the social but the social environment. The interchangeable nature of our identity construction is related to our online and physical environments increasingly overlapping. Both environments have been informed by each other in a number of ways, the two most immediately apparent developments, but certainly not the only, are:

1. Increase of invasive advertising – personal data being sold online has led to 'tailored' ads on social networking sites<sup>77</sup> and Google search pages in the same way that 'branded entertainment' strategy of product placement continues in films and television shows thought to be popular amongst a particular demographic.
2. Increase of self-service – such as the successful rise of self-scanning checkout systems over checkout people in grocery and department stores. The quick acceptance of these systems by consumers is clearly related to the now commonplace advent of online shopping and web-checkouts.

Notions of personal customisation are at the core of both of these phenomena, and reveal an interesting perspective of what it is to live within *Gesellschaft*. Furthermore, it arrives back at Turkle's theory of contemporary society being constantly *alone together*.<sup>78</sup> This compelling desire for personalisation coupled with a simultaneous need for connectedness in all areas of our lives leads to an almost constant focus on self, and is shaping our personal and societal development.

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<sup>77</sup> With the notable exception of Google+, for now. Juma, A. *No Ads on Google+ & More on Brand Pages*. <http://plusweek.ly/no-ads-on-google-more-on-brand-pages/>. 2011. Web. 31 Jan 2012

<sup>78</sup> Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print

*“Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. These days, it suggests substitutions that put the real on the run... Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy... Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other... As this happens, we remake ourselves and our relationships with each other through our new intimacy with machines.”<sup>79</sup>*

Paradoxically, this drive to personalise our ‘self’ within these spaces doesn’t lead to a higher degree of honest representation but further purports the simulation of the desired self. Meticulously constructed, the spaces that we locate ourselves within offer a fiction that reveals deeper truths through an unravelling of motivation. One artist whose work offers an investigation into fantasy constructed personal space is Anne Hardy (UK b. 1970). Hardy’s practice involves building detailed sets in her studio entirely from scratch. Figureless and offering limited explanation, a relationship builds with the spaces in our imagination<sup>1</sup>.

*“In pieces such as Cell and Untitled VI, Hardy’s dense interiors become sites of wonder and unease as seemingly miscellaneous found objects compile with an obsessive and meticulous order: Hardy’s subjects exude the not-quite-right ambience of dreamscape or madness; a sensation heightened through the unnatural intensity of artificial light. Printed in large format, Hardy’s photos give the viewer a sense of looking through a window at these spaces.”<sup>80</sup>*

Another artist who engages with these kinds of fictitious spaces, specifically online ones, is Tymek Borowski (PL b. 1984). Borowski dissects the nature of online spaces by employing the vernacular of the Internet; frequently referencing popular meme’s<sup>81</sup> and image tropes like *Rage Comics*.<sup>82</sup> Playfully re-examining the limitations and understanding of painting, he re-frames these aesthetics by inserting them into the physical domain of the

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<sup>79</sup> Pg. 1-3 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>80</sup> Pg. 124. Ellis, P; Messenger, J; Zagala, M; Art Gallery of South Australia. *Saatchi Gallery in Adelaide: British Art Now*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2011. Print.

<sup>81</sup> “For us in social media world, it’s the amusing joke (or trend) du jour. Often accompanied with a picture. Or a hashtag (on Twitter).” Weckler, A. *An A-Z of Social Media Jargon*. Your Tech. <http://www.yourtechstuff.com/techwire/2011/01/an-a-z-of-social-media-jargon.html>. 2011. Web. 2 Feb 2012

<sup>82</sup> “*Rage Comics* are series of web comics with characters, sometimes referred to as “rage faces”, that are often created with simple drawing software such as MS Paint. The comics are typically used to tell stories about real life experiences, and end with a humorous punchline [sic]. It has become increasingly popular to create the comics using web applications often referred to as “rage comic generators” or “rage makers.” Sav; Efrain. *Rage Comics*. Know Your Meme. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-comics>. 2011. Web. 2 Feb 2012

gallery.<sup>ii</sup> The ‘vernacular’ used by Borowski is both verbal and drawn. While he comments on contemporary online culture, he uses the tools and materials that characterise these spaces. His atelier is his laptop, his brushes and paint are virtual tools found in MS Paint and the Adobe Suite, and the subject matter he references are the pop icons found in virtual spaces. In fact, the only element of Borowski’s work that deviates from online ‘everyday life’ at all is that the images are printed on paper and presented in a gallery, not viewed on a screen. Borowski’s practice is reminiscent of the Impressionist movement that began Modern art by deviating from the Romantic and Realist standard of painting that preceded. Like the Impressionists, Borowski works in ‘the field’ of online culture, and depicts the actual subject matter found there to comment on contemporary life.

*“In a fully deliberate but light way, Borowski plays with conventions, clues, past and present. Contrary to appearances, he does not escape reality but rather follows its trails and records in order to relate to its fluid, elusive nature. It is painting of self-awareness and fulfilment, created with a huge dose of imagination and constant analysis, not just semantic, but also technological. Borowski is in it, with it, analyses and gets analysed.”<sup>83</sup>*

Witnessing the use of the Internet’s ‘language’ outside of an online forum is jarring initially and speaks again to Turkles notion of relationships being re-made in the technological age. Originally geek in-jokes, the popularity of memes is increasing within social networking sites as well as other Internet forums. The format of a meme is instantly recognisable and has become another element of image/identity construction, similar to ‘likes’ or ‘+1’s’. Meme’s can be included in the aforementioned list of ‘updates’ as yet another component in the collage that expressions of identity can be seen as today.

What I mean by the term *collage* is that in this age it is becoming increasingly difficult to view a whole, it seems we are much more comfortable with small burst of information that work together to *infer* a whole. Character limits on Tweets and status updates has caused us to become accustomed to viewing and communicating expressions of self as a collection of aphorisms. It is as though we are attempting to save space/time in the way we communicate, despite, or perhaps because of, the way the Internet has infinitely expanded space and time for its users. The possible public reach and broad accessibility of ‘sticky’<sup>84</sup> social networking sites raises the stakes of communication, consequently users are trying to

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<sup>83</sup> Pg. 24. Kozłowski, W. *10<sup>th</sup> Geppert Competition – What Does a Painter Do?*. Wrocław: Galerie Sztuk Współczesnej (BWA Wrocław - Galleries of Contemporary Art). 2011. Print

<sup>84</sup> Heath, C; Heath, D. *Made to Stick – Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die (With Added Material, Now Extra Sticky)*. New York: Random House. 2008. Print.

relay information as quickly and effectively as possible to avoid it getting lost in the 'noise' of everything else.

*"The Web is a communication medium that spans the globe, and by the measure of any engineer, we should be communicating better than ever. We probably are. But we aren't satisfied. We've wound up with a social Web in which tools have to be "sticky" to catch on. Facebook is the stickiest, because that's where "everyone" is. But, - no offense, Windows people - Facebook is like the Windows of Web 2.0. It's the most broadly compatible system, but we all resent using it a little. Do you know anyone who loves Facebook? It keeps getting noisier, more confusing, and less secure."<sup>85</sup>*

Noise from constant updating is what we all seem to be experiencing indefinitely within the social web, and the social in general. Visual, audio, widespread onslaught of the senses appears to be growing in our current climate, yet due to this overstimulation, we are no more contented than before. As we have seen, online updates and interactions often have real-life implications, and reciprocally, changes in real life will affect our online presence. As our real and virtual lives seem to be increasingly eclipsed, self and context are experiencing a sustained dynamism. It is the visual analysis of this investigation that I seek to represent in my studio-based research.

#### *Blurring of the Personal/Social and Physical/Online*

*"Networks of symbolic ties were precisely neither 'relational' nor 'social'. At the other extreme, our 'society' is perhaps in the process of putting an end to the social, of burying the social beneath a simulation of the social... For two centuries now, the uninterrupted energy of the social has come from deterritorialisation and from concentration in ever more unified agencies. A centralised perspective space which orientates everything inserted into it by simple convergence along the 'line of light' towards infinity (in effect, the social, like space and time, opens up a perspective towards infinity). The social can only be defined from this panoptic point of view."<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>85</sup> Mitchel, J. *Path, Timeline & Worship of the Self*. Read Write Web. [http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/path\\_timeline\\_worship\\_of\\_the\\_self.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/path_timeline_worship_of_the_self.php). 2011. Web. 31 Jan 2012

<sup>86</sup> Pg. 67-68 Baudrillard, J. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities ...or The End of the Social and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University. Semiotext(e) Inc, 1983. Print.

The networks of *symbolic* ties that Baudrillard describes are made real through my practice-based research. Originally I employed this concept through the development of a series of bondage-inspired sculptures, whereby the figure is omitted but nodes (knots) and pathways (rope) remain.<sup>iii</sup> The nature of this work is fluid as its dimensions are variable wherever it is installed in the same way that online representations of ourselves continue to vary and adapt throughout different SNS platforms. However throughout the course of my research it became clear that online selves are much more than the absence of body, they are their own environments - our self is located within a social environment, yet the self is its *own* social environment. These are personal environments, spaces where we 'live' 24/7, where we are constantly 'logged in' through our voluntary tethering to technology. Therefore I will create scenes of social 'habitats' utilising a multi-disciplinary approach of installation, photography and drawing. Weaving string throughout the items of the habitat creates an intricate web, informed by Callon, Latour and Law *Actor-Network Theory*, whereby a series of 'nodes' (either things or concepts) are linked together in a manner that holds them to be equally important and interrelated in such a way that they cannot be examined in isolation but must be looked at, as Baudrillard previously stated, from a *panoptic* point of view.

The webs form intricate labyrinthian pathways throughout the installation and suggest the absence of the physical body when juxtaposed with the tangible items they are currently (but never permanently) entwined within. On the walls of the space feature photographs of figures knitted within the rope labyrinth, which act almost as historical evidence of a recent past, the beginning of the duality between self and technology. The pressure of the rope bondage on the soft fleshiness of the figures appears to be almost at the point of squashing them out of existence. These interlacing actants are constructed with spaces of pause and spaces of impenetrability, comparable to Marcel Duchamp's *Sixteen Miles of String*<sup>iv</sup> installation shown in *The First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in New York.

*"When Duchamp wove a maze of twine around the paintings at a Surrealist exhibition [Pictured: 16 Miles of String, 1942], his purpose was the same as that of the creators of Happenings: to force the viewer to involve himself in his surroundings."<sup>87</sup>*

In addition to constructing a space that is similarly aesthetically spectacular as *16 Miles of String*, *Grace+* is motivated to produce that same outcome as Duchamp's *Happenings* inspired work, to force the viewer to be involved in the space in which the artwork is

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<sup>87</sup> Pg. 162. Tomkins, C. *The World of Marcel Duchamp 1887-1968*. Amsterdam: Time-Life Books. 1966. Print.

installed. The first feature of the exhibition that the viewer notices is the space is the presence of the ropes, and therefore they must negotiate their passage through the space accordingly. In the same way the viewer experienced the framed works within the rest of the New York Surrealist exhibition, the viewer of *Grace+* then notices how the framed works on the walls of the space are, at times, obscured by the presence of the rope. At this point, they must cognitively strain to view the framed works.

*“Duchamp’s design Sixteen Miles of String for the wry and challenging exhibition ‘First Papers on Surrealism’, a labyrinthine web that again recalls Ariadne’s ball of yarn and the heroic trial and journey of Theseus”<sup>88</sup>*

Yet once the viewer is able to locate the framed works, they are greeted with more questions. In an anti-climactic opposition to the artwork-obstructing sting labyrinth that was presented in the *First Papers on Surrealism*, the viewer of *Grace+* finds that the framed works are themselves fragments, not wholly contained scenes. In this way, the artwork moves away from modernist metanarrative found in *First Papers on Surrealism* and comparisons to Theseus’ labyrinth journey, and locates itself firmly in the realm of the postmodern. In *Grace+* the rope acts as metaphorical connector, the interwoven artworks and objects are not separate from one another, but act more as network, where objects are not only identified by the string but an integral part, a node in the mediated environment.

Beyond the framed works on the wall, the items within the labyrinthian rope habitat of *Grace+* are both found and made. All are supports for the self-conscious online self: flattering mirrors, luxurious chairs and of course, plenty of storage space. Some feature *Grace+* branding, that act as metaphors for the phenomenon of ‘likes’ and ‘+1’s within this opulent interior. Hand-made embellishes leave trace evidence of the human previously present within the interior. The uneasy juxtaposition between actants that imply ‘lived in’, next to a space that is evidently impenetrable to the corporeal self, acts as a befitting metaphor for SNS functions.

While the overall concept of the *Grace+* work is in namesake a parody of *Google+*, it is concerned with social networking and social spaces in the broadest sense. It seeks to look at these emerging phenomena with playful intrigue, without passing an affirmative or negative judgement. Indeed, the aim of this work is essentially creative documentation: I

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<sup>88</sup> Pg. 157. Howard, S. *Hidden Naos: Duchamp Labyrinths*. *Artibus et Historiae*. Vol. 15. Issue 29. 1994. Print.

seek to detect and record the changes in the increasingly mutable ideas of the social and the self as they have been implied by the technological unconscious.

## Conclusion

*“The technologized human or the ‘cyborg’ is becoming increasingly visible in postmodernity with the acceleration of high-tech body practices... The body is theoretically freed then from its traditional miredness in the cultural constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, among others... [In a radical sense] this view sees a body reduced to its surface, and ultimately, the disappearance of the body altogether, such that we are left only with ‘designer subjectivities’, or self-created identity ties that are ‘floating sign-systems’ with no fixed meanings.”<sup>89</sup>*

Our postmodern bodies are surely malleable, radical and especially *unmapped frontiers*. While this thesis has begun to attempt the mapping of the bodies synthesis with body modifications and technology, the infinite variations of this union that new technology allows for, mean that attempting universalities in regard to the production of this duality are challenging to say the least. However, one issue that has been made clear throughout the writing of this thesis is the need for a re-framing of what is considered ‘body’, ‘self’, and ‘identity’ that incorporates the importance of our technological elements. We have seen the beginnings of this technological significance, yet the reality is most of us are ‘cyborg adolescents’.<sup>90</sup> The current and future generations will be the first to grow up always ‘tethered’ to technology, and it is through the study/witnessing of these *forever-reframed* selves that more conclusive answers will be reached.

Yet, observing our struggles as ‘cyborg adolescents’ provides some fascinating insights into what it is that makes up our ‘humanness’ and ‘selves’. While we are in the process of translating our physical selves to our online counterparts there are clear similarities between the ways we modify ourselves in both arenas. Furthermore not only are there similarities in the acts of modification, there are similarities in the motivation for modification in the first place. Obviously the same motivations that serve evolution also serve *self-directed* evolution, such as attracting a mate and fitting-in socially etc. But the specifics of our chosen modifications speak directly to the ethos of a cultural climate, and therefore provide valuable clues to a prediction of a successful future climate.

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<sup>89</sup> Pg. 185-186 Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

<sup>90</sup> Case, A. *We Are All Cyborgs Now*. TEDWomen Online Lecture, Filmed December 2010, Posted Jan 2011. [http://www.ted.com/talks/amber\\_case\\_we\\_are\\_all\\_cyborgs\\_now.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/amber_case_we_are_all_cyborgs_now.html)

While there are a variety of arguments from both sides of the posthumanist spectrum in regard to the increasing movement away from a purely corporeal existence, some cautious, some celebratory, there remains a feeling of inevitability about it. Posthumanists of the *H+*<sup>91</sup> ilk, *Vita-more et al*<sup>92</sup>, have theorised about the potential for an entirely online existence, where all our ‘information’ is digitised and uploaded in the same way that public records and music changed from analogue to digital. Yet the pleasure of ‘fleshy’ sensations continues to be appealing, as the variety and popularity of the bodymod movement can attest to.

Therefore we return to the need for re-framing this issue of the constructed body and the self. While it is tempting to simplify this issue by wanting to find a singular solution as a prediction of our future selves – entirely online, entirely corporeal, or some kind of permanent static fusion – it is ultimately in vain. Our postmodern bodies are housed within (as well as manufacturing due to the nature of their existence) an increasingly simulated and constructed environment. And this environment (and therefore, ourselves) will not be guided into a singular pathway, but rather, will continue to splinter off into fluctuating niches as our options continue to grow.

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<sup>91</sup> *H+ magazine*. <http://hplusemagazine.com/>

<sup>92</sup> Dvorsky, G. Marone, R. Miller, J. D. And other frequent contributors to *H+* magazine/community.

## Appendix – Reflections and connections between the written and studio research

*Grace+* was an installation that conceptualised a faceless representation of networked identity. Featuring artworks and domestic furniture/objects networked together by rope, the exhibition created an environment that symbolised constructed postmodern identity building.<sup>v</sup> *Grace+* brought together the three main themes that characterise ideas of contemporary identity building both online and offline as discussed within the parameters of this thesis: stylisation, synchronous fluctuation and transience.

### *Stylisation*

The environment presented in the *Grace+* installation was distinctly domestic. Featuring a bedroom, living room and dining room setting of the artist, at first glance it appeared to be following the Grunge tradition of public display of the intimate and personal, like Tracy Emin's *My Bed* (1998).<sup>93</sup> However, upon closer inspection, the viewer found that there were no traces of actual living within the space – where Emin had left waste, dirty laundry and unkempt sheets, *Grace+* was manicured, with every item carefully placed for display.<sup>vi</sup> Each item was indexical, aiming to suggest characteristics favoured by the author to represent a constructed identity that occurs, as discussed in chapter one and two, both online and offline.

This need for constant editing and omitting out the 'real' occurs as the boundaries between our public and private life continue to blur.<sup>94</sup> The need for performance, as described by Turkle,<sup>95</sup> becomes more necessary as we are encouraged to share more of ourselves. This is particularly evident when we see more of our flesh in the public domain, and more of our everyday life logged online via SNS. *Grace+* contained items that make up some of the environment of the artists everyday life, and displayed them in a shop window of a busy inner-city street, along with appropriate signage<sup>vii</sup> and accessories<sup>ix</sup> acting as "branding" for the artist's identity. In doing this, the space acted as a real life version of a SNS profile, an act of self-promotion as well as self-glorification, to a largely unknown audience.

The acts of concealing, while presenting as a revealing in *Grace+* mirrored acts of bodymod, creating an environment reminiscent of an identity that is "*culturally shaped and*

<sup>93</sup> Emin, T. *My Bed*. Mattress, linens, pillows, objects. 79 x 211 x 234 cm. 1998.

<sup>94</sup> Pg. 153 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>95</sup> Pg. 185 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

*socially ordered*".<sup>96</sup> The simultaneous highlighting and hiding were made possible partially through curating and largely through the rope-work networking. Emphasising the Turkle quote from chapter three: "*Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.*"<sup>97</sup> Interconnected, and partially obscured, by the rope suspension<sup>x</sup> the objects within the environment were transcended from the every-day, reminiscent of Christo and Jean-Claude's as *Package* (1967).<sup>98</sup> *Grace+* proposed that the need for transcendence is *due* to this interconnectedness – while the nodes public and private, online and offline bodies continue to streamline as one network, stylisation of our identity is inevitable. The individual nodes however, are constantly changing, while the concept of the network remains 'whole'.

### *Synchronous fluctuation*

The nodes within the network of *Grace+* were the objects and artworks installed as separate 'happenings' within the one network/artwork. Reminiscent of a neural network within a nervous system, the nature and location of the nodes may change while still allowing the network to function. This was evidenced within *Grace+* by the fact that all the objects present within the nodes were unattached, able to be shuffled. The breeze from the doorway allowed the objects and suspended nodes to move and vibrate. While *Grace+* was like a snapshot of one possible network configuration, its impermanent fixtures kept the dynamic feel of a neural network.

This dynamism within nodes of the one roped network of *Grace+* also acted as an appropriate metaphor for the non-hierarchical linkages of online connectivity. Just as comments within an SNS can be edited, and parts of a body can be aesthetically transformed, no one part of a network endangers the existence of the network itself. This implies that no particular node is of special value. If that is the case, then there can be endless simultaneous fluctuation of the *actants of self*<sup>99</sup> discussed in chapter three. Fluctuation signifies temporality, which leads us to the final important theme within *Grace+*.

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<sup>96</sup> Pg. 25-26. Pitts, V. *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

<sup>97</sup> Pg. 1-3 Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Print.

<sup>98</sup> Christo and Jean-Claude. *Package - Purple/black package*. Polyethylene, fabric, rope, staples. 14.0 x 45.0 x 28.0cm. 1967.

<sup>99</sup> "The identity of an actant must be formally indexed to the attributes it can present when it enters into relations. Forming relations and inciting connections is the expression of a will-to-connect. This will-to-connect is the actant's way of endeavouring to persist in being. That is, in one sense at least, 'agency'. It is also what drives networks to incorporate and fold around actants. In themselves, though, actants are 'functionally blank'. Their every presentation masks a more fundamental lack of presentation or failure immediately to signify. The unfolding of presentations, accompanied by this withdrawing from presentation, constitutes the essence of the actant. Such an essence is effectively a trajectory, a movement through successive presentations and relations" Pg. 41. Law, J, Hassard, J. *Actor Network Theory and After*. International: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999. Print.

### *Transience*

Just as the nodes within *Grace+* were changeable, many of the elements were also transient, as was network in its entirety. This is especially noted with the inclusion of the fundamental metaphor of transience – living objects. There were two sets of flowers<sup>xi</sup> placed within *Grace+* that were given the opportunity to decompose, and be replaced throughout the exhibitions opening. Here we can see a basic opportunity for re-creation that is indicative of how simple it is to create a new identity within online bodiless freedom, and offline embodied opportunity. Indeed, this serious yet simple identity play implies of anonymity within the network, illustrated by the series of photographs (whose subject/identity remains anonymous) installed within the exhibition<sup>xii</sup>.

The cropped images of bound bodies and the suspension of the objects within *Grace+* as they relate to transience make reference to the early body suspensions of Stelarc. He has described his early suspensions as an act of simultaneous anxiety and consolidation: “*Suspended and in stress the anonymous body realises its obsolescence*”<sup>100</sup>. While this statement was made three decades ago, it rings especially true now in the context of online identity construction and the mainstreaming of bodymod within the contemporary network of identity. *Grace+* was intentionally figure-less as a means of conceptualising the superseding of the physical body its entirety with that of temporary actants as identity flags.

The final, and possibly most important element of transience featured within *Grace+* was the location of the network/exhibition itself. Instead of installing in a gallery, *Grace+* was exhibited as a pop-up in an empty shop. In doing so, the work aimed to situate itself within the context of the conceptual discussion – an every-day location. In doing so, the work was able to interact with the every-day viewer, as well as temporarily define the entire space into the image of it’s own identity. In this way, *Grace+* can also be viewed as a Happening, requiring the participation of the audience to be realised.

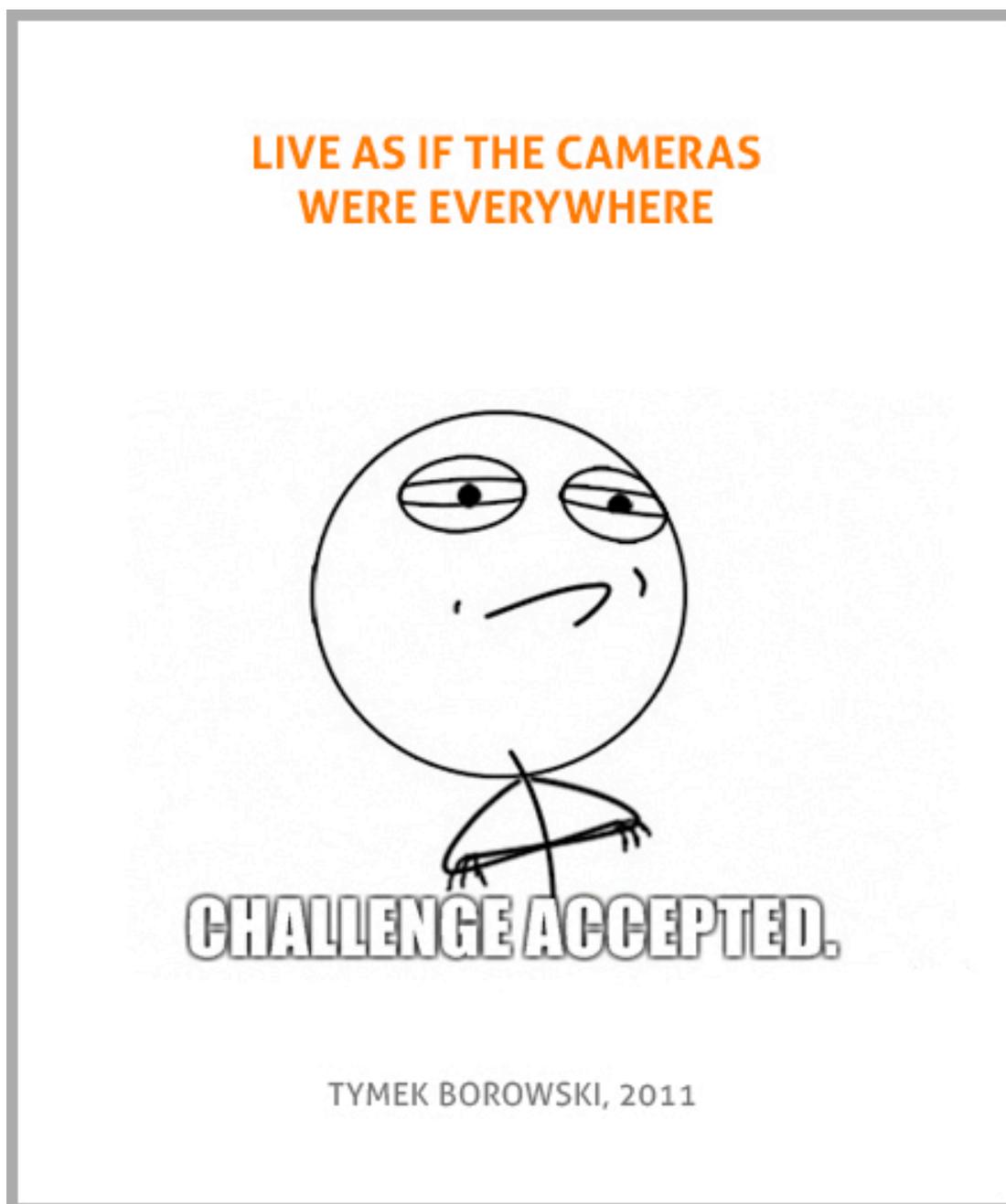
*Grace+* was an ambitious and experimental work that strived to combine a number of concepts into a cohesive whole. Symbolically exploring the networked facets of identity and the limitations of a discipline, it succeeded in promoting the discussion of contemporary self-construction within the viewership it attracted. “*Kingston’s parodic take on the social network is humorous and revealing. Like*”.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Stelarc. *Suspensions* (approx. 1980). <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20316>. 7 August 2012. Web.

<sup>101</sup> Frost, A. *Grace+*. *The Art Life*. 1 June 2012. <http://theartlife.com.au/?p=6291>. 7 August 2012. Web. Also published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

i

Anne Hardy, *Cell* (2004) image courtesy of Saatchi Gallery Artist profiles:  
[http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/anne\\_hardy\\_cell.htm](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/anne_hardy_cell.htm)



ii

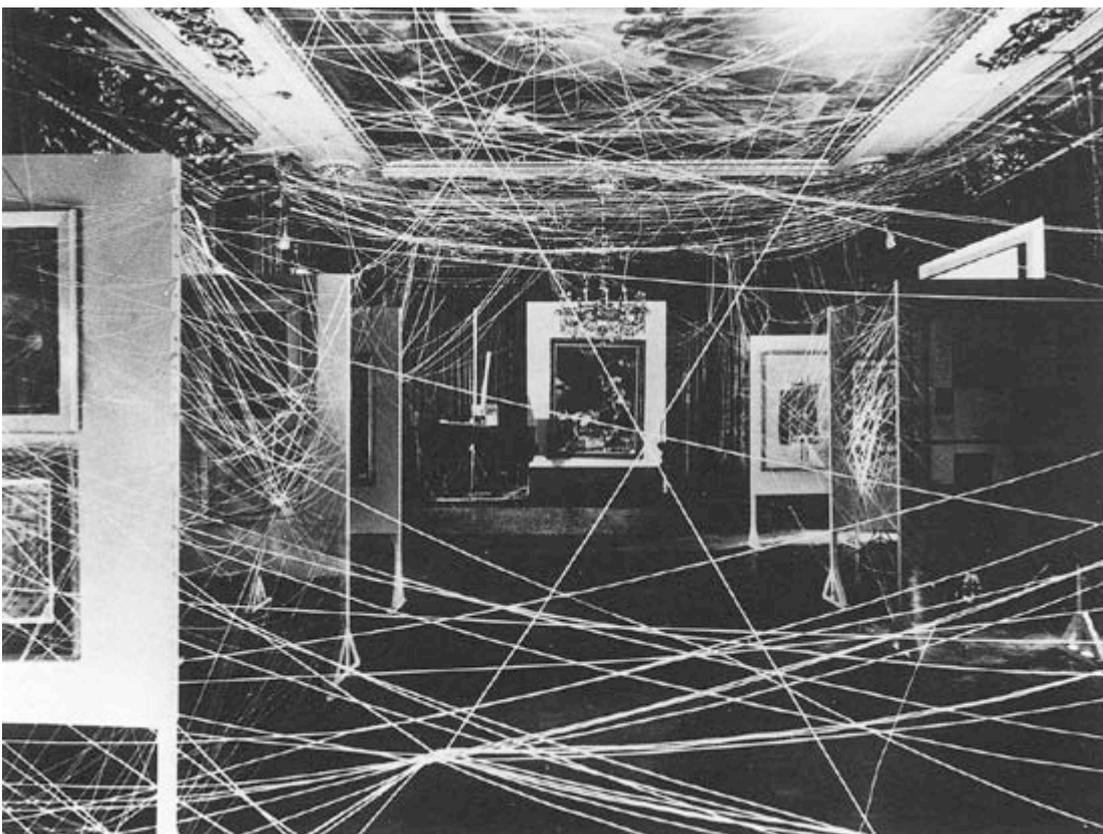
Tymek Borowski, *Cameras 4* (2011). Image courtesy of the artist's blog.

<http://tymekborowski.blogspot.com.au/>



iii

Grace Kingston, *Disembodied Bondage series*, (2011)



iv

Marcel Duchamp, *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942). Image courtesy of Tout-Fait – the Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal:

[http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue\\_4/interviews/hirschhorn/popup\\_9.html](http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/interviews/hirschhorn/popup_9.html)



v



vi



vii



viii



ix

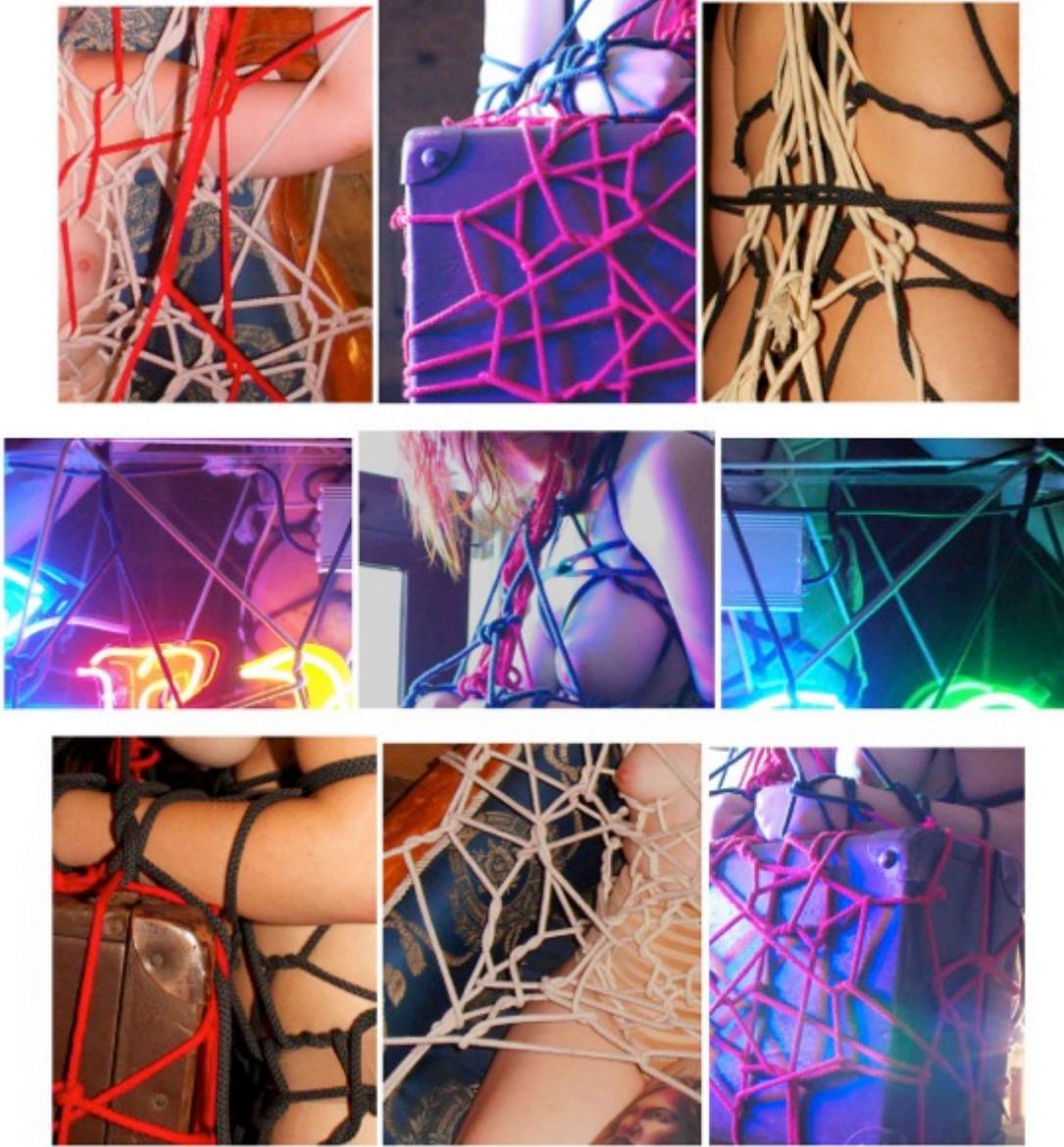


x



xi





xii

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