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BODIES IN FLUX

To consider what constitutes as scandalous or taboo, we must first identify what is accepted as 'normal'. Being normal hinges on the assumption that one will act in accordance with a set of standards defined by our particular culture in regard to aesthetics, conduct and interpersonal relationships. When a person wilfully breaks these social norms they are subject to ostracism and punishment. Yet people have always and continue to do so, whether in secret or amongst other like-minded groups. The first obvious sign of an individual's adherence to the doctrine of normalcy is the aesthetic of their body.

The body is our first port of call when we seek to interact with others. The way we present it aesthetically, and the actions and gestures we make with it socially, are largely done so as means of identification. It is considered scandalous for one to alter or modify their body in a way that differs from the social norm because it consciously interrupts this identification process. To modify our body in such a taboo way announces to society that we are rejecting their dominant paradigm, and that in itself is a scandalous act. Yet not all modification is for subversive reasons, cosmetic surgery is generally undertaken for 'normalising' reasons, whereas tattooing, piercing et cetera for anomalous reasons. When our body is the *identifier*, then I argue that the changes and modifications we impose on them, no matter the motivation, are signifiers of our sustained authorship with our *identities*.

Furthermore, taboo, a break from the norm within society, is becoming more difficult to define, as the term 'society' is no longer limited to geographic location since the onset of globalisation and the rise of online culture. Indeed, the term 'body' has also taken on new meaning in this virtual context. In recent years we are spending more time in our online 'bodies' as interaction has in part moved to online realms that seek to imitate real-life places – social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and more recently, *Google+*. And due to the immeasurable size of the Internet, what is scandalous in real life, may not be so in other online places. In this paper I will discuss the process of modification to our real life and online bodies as a means to 'fit-in' here and 'stick-out' there, and argue that due to the globalised nature of contemporary society, there may not be any truly *taboo* bodies left.

This paper will start with a brief history of body modification in the West, and it's cultural implications. I will then draw connections between body modification and the rise in online digital culture, asserting that the way we modify our online presences is similar to the way we modify our real bodies. Finally establishing our increasingly dependent relationship with technology and our online presences, I argue that we are all *modified*, and despite the

motivation (subversive or otherwise) we will find a like-minded community. Therefore, without the threat of social ostracism, there may not be any more genuine instances of bodies that are considered *taboo*<sup>1</sup>.

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

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>2</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>3</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>4</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>5</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> centuries<sup>6</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

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the content of this paper has been adapted from my Masters of Fine Art thesis *Grace + Identifying and Exploring the Nature of Online Identities as Expressed through the Platform of Social Networking Sites*. (2012)

<sup>2</sup>M. DeMello, *Bodies of inscription: a cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. North Carolina 2000.

- S. Gilbert, *Tattoo history: a source book: an anthology of historical records of tattooing throughout the world*. California 2000.

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

<sup>3</sup>A. D. Couper, *Sailors and traders: a maritime history of the Pacific peoples*. Hawaii 2009, p.20.

<sup>4</sup>Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. San Francisco 2010, p.137.

<sup>5</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." *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup>M. DeMello, *Encyclopaedia of body adornment*, California 2007, p.5.

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>7</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>8</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>9</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>10</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 Jim Ward and Fakir 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>11</sup>. This action became one of the original instances of *cultural appropriation*, now considered a politically incorrect taboo, that would go on to spur the problematically

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<sup>7</sup> Pg. ii. DeMello, M. *Bodies of Inscription: a Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. North Carolina: Duke University Press. 2000. Print.

<sup>8</sup> 'Gay', [[:] <http://wiki.bmezine.com/index.php/Gay>, accessed 10.08.2011.

<sup>9</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>10</sup> Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern...*, p.178.

<sup>11</sup> Jury, D. Jury, M. *Dances Sacred and profane*. 1985, [[:] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087117/>, accessed 10.01.2012.

named *Modern Primitives* (MP) movement. While Musafar claims to have conceived the term in 1967,<sup>12</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>13</sup>. The name is problematic not 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 directly largely at the class problems modern primitivism poses<sup>14</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>15</sup> fashions which have seen the aforementioned *Flash* style make a come-back<sup>16</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>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</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", Vale, V. Hardy, E. Tuttle, L. Gatewood, C. *Modern...*, p.13.

<sup>13</sup> V. Pitts, *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification*. New York 2003, p.119.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p.126-128.

<sup>15</sup> C., Clerk., *Vintage tattoos: a sourcebook for old-school designs and tattoo artists*, California 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Vogue Australia. *Club Vogue Lookbooks – Tattoos*, [@:] <http://www.vogue.com.au/club+vogue/lookbooks/tattoos.4665?pos=0#top>, accessed 10.01.2012.

<sup>17</sup> V. Pitts, *op. cit.*, p.31.

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 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 or scandalous 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>18</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>19</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>20</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>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</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/>, accessed 25.01.2012.

<sup>19</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>, accessed 30.01.2012.

<sup>20</sup> S. Hundal, *The Dark Side of Skin-Whitening Cream*, [[:]] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/01/skin-whitening-death-thailand>, accessed 10.01.2012.

<sup>21</sup> J. Rivers, V. Frankel, *Men Are Stupid . . . and They Like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty Through Plastic Surgery*, New York 2009, p.38.

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>22</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>23</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>24</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>25</sup>, is more commonly found in science fiction, which has left many sceptical<sup>26</sup>. In addition, there is sense of uneasiness that posthumanism has received, largely due to the moral ambiguity that arises in a Judeo-Christian society when it is scandalous for one to be 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

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<sup>22</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, Michigan 1994.

<sup>23</sup> V. Pitts, *op. cit.*, p.152.

<sup>24</sup> J. Savulescu, N. Bostrom, *Human enhancement*. Oxford 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Vita-More, N. deGrey, A. Tirosh-Samuelson, H. Bostrom, B. *et al.*?????????

<sup>26</sup> *Is Human Nature Obsolete?: Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition*, ed. H. W. Baillie, T. Casey, Boston 2005, p. 406-407.

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>27</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>28</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>29</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>30</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 something so horrible as everyone getting frail and decrepit and dependent was something we should live with forever<sup>31</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. For this reason I chose to explore these cyborgian concerns in a performance piece *Bloody Machine*, which specifically appropriates the motif of the human figure physically plugged into the machine. This is a common trope amongst contemporary sci-fi and has been made famous by films and comics like Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* franchise and *The Matrix*. The outcomes of technological addition to the body in such texts almost always

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<sup>27</sup> H. Tirosh-Samuels, *H+/-: Transhumanism and Its Critics*, London 2011, p.19-20.

<sup>28</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>29</sup> S. Mann, S. Arkadiou a.k.a Stelarc, *Cyborg Thinkers to Address Humanity's Future: Wearable computer inventor Steve Mann and performance artist Stelarc*, [@:], [http://www.transhumanism.org/tv/2004/TV\\_2004\\_press\\_release\\_2.htm](http://www.transhumanism.org/tv/2004/TV_2004_press_release_2.htm), accessed 30.04.2011.

<sup>30</sup> A. deGrey, *We will be able to live to 1,000*, [@:], [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/4003063](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4003063), accessed 4.05.2011.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

renders the wearer 'superior' to that of a normal human being, the conclusions being that machines are stronger than humans and their union benefits both parties. However in *Bloody Machine*, I wished to subvert these assumptions and perhaps highlight their ultimate vulnerability.

Of the fictional Cyborgs that we see in the aforementioned films, the source of the 'superior' status generally afforded to them is due to the perceived durability of their mechanical enhancements. It is common knowledge that steel bears more weight and will not shatter like bones, that plastic is lightweight and durable, unlike fleshy organs. But it is rare that we discuss and appreciate the strength of our bio-body. Our body is in a constant state of renewal and upgrade at a cellular level; our largest organ, the skin, when pierced through the epidermis is strong enough to hold two to three times that of our own body weight for extended periods of time; and most importantly we can withstand extensive environmental exposure, which without maintenance (that machines cannot perform on themselves like a human can) quickly leaves machines degraded and defunct.

It is for this reason that I sought to celebrate the surprising fragility of technology in my performance *Bloody Machine*. Performed at *Plump Gallery*<sup>32</sup> Enmore, Sydney in April 2012, I was cannulised in my arm, with a lead feed into what is arguably the most popular piece of contemporary technology – the iPhone. With the density of blood at approximately  $1060\text{kg/m}^3$ <sup>33</sup>, it is very close to that of pure water's density of  $1000\text{kg/m}^3$ <sup>34</sup> therefore I theorised that the rate at which the iPhone sustained damage from blood would be similarly as successful to that of water, and with the eventual help of anti-coagulants, I was proved correct. In connecting myself organically to my most favoured device, that mediates and represents me in my daily life, I aimed to personify a legion of fictional Cyborgs who were literally plugged into their machines. However, despite the years of collaborative human labour that goes into an iPhone and machines like it, 300ml of what nourishes me as a human, destroys it as a device.

What I experienced from the audience during this performance was a clear backlash to technology as a symbol of our increasingly tethered lives. It was brief, yet exciting and anarchistic. We laughed as the phone struggled to continue functioning and flashed an error message on its screen. We cried out in joy when we succeeded in finally destroying the iPhone. The irony being that of course, many were taking pictures of the spectacle on their iPhones and uploading them in real-time to *Facebook*. While it was ironic, it is not so surprising that this

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<sup>32</sup> [[:], <http://plumpgallery.org/>

<sup>33</sup> M. Shmukler, *Density of Blood*, [[:], <http://hypertextbook.com/facts/>, accessed 10.08.2011.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.



turn of events took place. Our dependence on technology is escalating in unpredictable, yet surreptitiously telling ways, indicative of a new, modern condition.

### *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 paper 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>35</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>36</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>37</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]. 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

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<sup>35</sup> N. K. Hayles, *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*, Chicago 1999, p. 157. Quoted within quote is an excerpt from Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*.

<sup>36</sup> S. Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York 2011, p.275.

<sup>37</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.

pastimes and different friends... the 'life mix' refers to more than combing a virtual life with a physically embodied one<sup>38</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>39</sup>", the next being your latest status update, followed by your personal information (job title, school, relationship status, 'likes' etc)<sup>40</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>41</sup>.

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>42</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.

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<sup>38</sup> S. Turkle, *op. cit.*, p.194-195.

<sup>39</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), accessed 13.12.2011.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> S. Turkle, *op. cit.*, p.185.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p.180.

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>43</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 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>44</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

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p.185.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 254.

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 the body modification rituals discussed earlier. Modifications like tattoos, piercing, burning, and scarring et cetera hold varied and deep symbolic significances. Contemporary body modification practices (known as 'bodymod' to distinguish between tribal and contemporary) 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.

#### *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>45</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 that we impose on our physical body. There are several phenomena's 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>46</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

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<sup>45</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" J. Law, J. Hassard, *Actor Network Theory and After*, International: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999, p.41.

<sup>46</sup> With the notable exception of Google+, for now. A. Juma, *No Ads on Google+ & More on Brand Pages*, [@:], <http://plusweek.ly/no-ads-on-google-more-on-brand-pages/>, accessed 31.01.2012.

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*<sup>47</sup>. Furthermore, it arrives back at Turkle's theory of contemporary society being constantly *alone together*<sup>48</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. In particular as we see boundaries between our physical self and location blur with those of the virtual body, it becomes apparent that in our current society we truly are able to be anyone(s) we want in any 'place' we want. We will be able to find a place of acceptance somewhere online, no matter who or what we are being at the time. When there is no longer one local community with one set of standards, but rather one giant network with access to a myriad of micro-communities each with their own sets of societal norms and expectations, there is no longer cause to be shunned or ostracised, no matter how our body is 'presenting' at the time. And thus we can no longer regard the 'body' as taboo.

This notion is important, not only about the issue of re-framing, but also because it shows the potential for a contemporary society that *truly* embraces individuality and diversity, as the 'different' and 'taboo' body now has a space for celebration. This is a kind of tolerance that has never been seen on a mass scale before. And a society that fosters individuality and diversity inevitably leads to innovation<sup>49</sup>. In fact, it is this kind of tolerance that has led to phenomenon's like *Moore's Law*,<sup>50</sup> which describes the exponential growth of technology in recent years. Furthermore, we could describe the loss of the 'taboo' body as a consequence of a social Moore's Law, as the number of new individuals and groups operating within the network increasing every day only furthers to push the body further from the description of 'taboo' to that of 'individual'.

As what was once used to shun, may now be used to celebrate, we discover that we are on the verge of an exciting new stage in history. Where one may find social acceptance with in the broader society just as we may now online, a stage where we can be pierced, branded,

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<sup>47</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).

<sup>48</sup> Turkle, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> E. Markowitz, *How to foster innovation through diverse work groups*, [@:], <http://www.inc.com/guides/2011/01/how-to-foster-innovation-through-diverse-workgroups.html>, accessed 27.04.2012.

<sup>50</sup> Big Think Editors, *Big idea: technology grows exponentially*, <http://bigthink.com/ideas/31678>, accessed 27.04.2012.

tattooed, dyed and cosmetically or technologically altered (digitally or physically) without being subject to social ostracism or ridicule. This is a hopeful new age of acceptance, individuality and freedom of expression.