# A Defining Decade in the Age of Extimacy:
# How Digital Platforms Have Shaped Contemporary Art Practices

Luseane Nina Kinahoi Tonga

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on a decade of contemporary art practice that begins in 2007, corresponding with the rise of mobile internet technologies. It surveys a vast and evolving techno-cultural landscape through the work of artists whose practices engaged with social media, video sharing platforms, virtual worlds, gaming and indigenous applications. In particular, it examines the trope of the extimate avatar in contemporary art in relation to artists who draw on the potential and materiality of digital platforms and online applications. These digital platforms and online technologies that gave rise to the trope of the extimate avatar have collectively contributed to the perception and practice of selfhood in the age of extimacy, where the distinctions between what is accessible intimate, public and private is increasingly fluid.

The concept of extimacy or intimate exteriorities is central to this thesis. Extimacy or extimité (extimacy) is a neologism coined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to theorize the psychic interrelation between interior and exterior. Throughout this thesis Lacan's work is referenced alongside other scholars who expanded on the concept of extimacy to problematize and transcend the distinction between interiorities and exteriorities. Drawing on definitions of extimacy as practices of extroversion and self-disclosure that illustrate the non-distinction of intimate and exterior, this thesis proposes the trope of the 'extimate avatar' that enables representational and relational experiences of identities.

To explore the materiality digital platforms and online technologies and the trope of the extimate avatar and how this has informed and influenced the work of contemporary artists, this thesis discusses works by Janet Lilo, Erica Scourti, Oliver Laric, Amie Siegel, Natalie Bookchin, Cao Fei, Eva and Franco Mattes, Alan Kwan, Feng Mengbo, Momo Pixel, Skawennati, Rachael Rakena, and Leah King-Smith.

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## Introduction

Within contemporary art, the concept of extimacy has been employed by curators and scholars to explore the intimate relationship between contemporary art, digital platforms and new technologies. It has also been utilised as a curatorial framework in recent exhibitions, including *Extimacy, Art, Intimacy and Technology* (2011), *CTRL + [SELF]: Intimacy, Extimacy & Control in the Age of the Overexposure of Self* (2016) and *Gifts of the Earth and Extimacy* (2020), to explore how technologies have redefined and reconfigured notions of public and private, the self and other, and the visible and invisible.[1] A shared characteristic of these exhibitions is the use of the trope of the avatar by contemporary artists as a medium and mode of their practice. This includes artists creating graphic avatars as animations or machinima (virtual world recordings) in virtual worlds such as Second Life. It has also included artists creating game-based art works that encompass static and interactive graphic avatars, the latter most commonly presented within an interactive art game. This thesis expands the current scholarship of the trope of the avatar in contemporary art to encompass its currency and diversity online as a vernacular mode of creative self-expression on digital platforms and online applications.

The central concern of this thesis is the expansion of the trope of the avatar as a form of extimacy in contemporary art that recognises the ways in which artists draw on the materiality of digital mediums and platforms. In this thesis the concept of digital materiality draws on Johanna Drucker's argument that digital formats have a performative materiality, suggesting that 'what something *is* has to be understood in terms of what it does, how it works within machinic, system and cultural domains.'[2] Performative materiality frames digital media as being performative, highlighting its use and what is produced from the many activities and engagements, whether this is processing code, viewing videos, or performing music. According to Drucker, material conditions provide 'a base, a score, a point of departure, a provocation, from which the work is produced as an event.'[3] Performative materialities are thus dependent on interrelated systems and conditions that rely on the cognitive capacities of the user.

As a counter to the popular framing of digital media as immaterial, Drucker builds upon the work of Matthew Kirschenbaum who argues that materiality is essential to the operation and identity of digital media. Kirschenbaum argues that digital media has two forms of materiality, forensic and formal. Understood in relation to one another, forensic materiality is based on the principle of individualisation of the physical world and encompasses the variety of surfaces and substrates of computing; [4] formal materiality refers to codes and structures of multiple relational computational states on a data set or digital object, as Kirschenbaum explains in the example of a simple image:

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[1] Extimacy, Art, Intimacy and Technology, Museum of Contemporary Art, Palma De Majorca Spain, curated by Pau Waelder, 29 January 2011-1 May 2011; CTRL + [SELF]: Intimacy, Extimacy & Control in the Age of the Overexposure of Self, Studio XX Montreal, curated by Dra Laura Baigorri, 3-24 November; Gifts of the Earth and Extimacy, 21c Durham, artist installation by Marissa Moran Jahn and Rafi Segal, January 2020-December 2021.

[2] Drucker, 'Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface.'

[3] Drucker.

[4] Kirschenbaum, Mechanisms: New Media and Forensic Imagination, 11.

> An image file is typically considered to consist of nothing but information about the image itself – the composition of its pixilated bitmap, essentially. However, the image can carry metadata (documentation as to how it was created, embedded as plain text in the file's header), as well as more colourful freight, such as steganographic image or a digital watermark. This content will only become visible when the data object is subjected to the appropriate formal processes, which is to say when the appropriate software environment is invoked – anything from the 'Show Header' function of an off-the-shelf-image view to a 1280-bit encryption key. At this point one layer of the digital object is artificially naturalized in its relation to the other, the original image which suddenly manifest extra, hidden, or special data.[5]

Drucker extends these dimensions of materiality to emphasise the performative dimension of digital materiality, in order to understand its use in terms of how it works within machinistic, systemic and cultural domains.[6] A critical component of each chapter in this thesis addresses the ways artists draw on the performative materiality of the trope of the avatar online as part of machinic systems and cultural domains. In doing so, it illustrates the ways artists are drawing on methodologies and language of online domains, such as 'convergence', 'mashups' and 'recombinant forms,' as part of their contemporary art practices. It will also reveal the expansion of contemporary art to include new vernacular mediums and practices, such as selfies, machinima and vlogging, as new forms of extimate self-representation, embodiment, subjectivity and performativity.

Focusing loosely around the first decade of mobile internet that began in 2007, this thesis examines the trope of the avatar in relation to contemporary artists who draw on the materiality, and potential of digital platforms, online applications and new technologies. Through this decade, the contemporary artists of this thesis were working concurrent with, and in response to the techno-cultural landscape that elevated the trope of the avatar as a form of extimacy. This thesis proposes the term 'extimate avatar' to define the elevation of the avatar during this decade. The deployment of the extimate avatar, in its myriad manifestations across and between digital platforms, has shaped and reconfigured the perception and practice of identity and selfhood.

In a relatively short time, the internet has become embedded into everyday life. The launch of the first iPhone in 2007 by Apple, dubbed the 'pocket computer,' ushered in a new era of smartphones that combined the functionalities of ipods (music devices), phones and internet access. [7] The advancements of mobile internet technologies has increased internet accessibility and transformed how people communicate, create identities, form communities, grow and maintain connections and participate in private and public life. These have created a constant flow between physical spaces, applications, devices and a host of digital platforms that dispel the now antiquated notion of cyberspace as a distinct and separate space. Instead, the notion of being online on the World Wide Web has been folded into corporeal experiences of space, place and identities.

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[5] Kirschenbaum, 12.

[6] Drucker, 'Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface.'

[7] Eadicicco, 'Why the iPhone Upended the Tech Industry.'

This thesis loosely follows the first decade of what is termed 'mobile internet,' which contributed to the growing significance of the trope of the extimate avatar as internet access became mobile. Hsu et al. (2007) offer the following definition of mobile internet: 'The mobile Internet refers to mobile commerce activities, including mobile telecommunication, mobile content, entertainment service and e-commerce relying on a mobile platform.'[8] Mobile internet extended the ubiquity of the internet and the generation of the Web described as Web 2.0.[9] As defined by Tim O'Reilly, Web 2.0 does not have a 'hard boundary.' It is rather described as set of principles and practices, including framing the Web as a platform; harnessing collective intelligence and framing users as co-developers; data monitoring; end of software releases as products and promotion of services; lightweight software and business models; software above the level of a single device; and richer experiences. While these principles and practices all contribute to the context of artistic practices, the most relevant to this thesis include the framing of the web as a platform of participation, the repositioning of web users as co-developers, and the potential to harness collective intelligence and attention.

Contemporary artists of this thesis engage with a Web 2.0 that is characterised by user-generated content that includes blogs (web logs), vlogs (video logs) and classification systems, such as folksonomies and hashtags. The emphasis on the 'user' as co-creator and distributor of content had significant social and cultural impacts, which highlighted the fluidity between online and offline experiences. This is evidenced in the creation of new forms of celebrity and fame, referred to as micro-celebrity that emerged through social media platforms such as YouTube. It is also evident in the ways in which users are able to effect change and aid in mobilising protest and collective action. An example is the well-documented use of twitter and Facebook by youth during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 to mobilise, organise and stay updated about protests. On a global scale, the 2013 twitter hashtag campaign '#blacklivesmatter,' created in response to the acquittal of police officer George Zimmerman for the death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin, created a global social justice movement against racism and police brutality. These disparate examples indicate the vast spectrum through which the online activities of 'users' are affecting and shaping their lived realities on a local and global scale.

The agency of the 'user' online has given new currency to the trope of the avatar, the presence of the user online. The term avatar is derived from the Sanskrit term 'avatara,' meaning descent, used in

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[8] Hsu, Lu and Hsu, 'Adoption of the mobile Internet: an empirical study of multimedia message service (MMS),'715.

[9] Other terms used for this phase of the internet include participatory web, participative web or the social web.

Hinduism to describe the bodily manifestation of immortal deities. In the 1980s, game developers drew on the meaning of the term to name the first animated game characters as a medium and mode of communication and play. During the 1990s, the term avatar was utilised in graphic multi-user domains that enabled an exploratory form of identity play, inspired in part by the early utopianism of the internet. While the term avatar persists as graphic representations of users in virtual multi-user domains or games, it has been broadened through this decade by digital platforms and online applications. The trope of the extimate avatar now includes other modes of self-representation, including profile pages from social networking websites and YouTube videos. Given the diversity of online platforms and significance of being online, it is common for 'users' to be constituted by many different avatars.

Central to this thesis is the concept of extimacy or intimate exteriorities, which are inherent in specific forms of digital platforms and online technologies. Jacques Lacan coined the French neologism extimité attaching the prefix 'ex' to the word intimacy, translated in English as 'Extimacy'. For Lacan, extimacy describes an intimate exteriority, through which the 'subject's inside' becomes the 'first exteriority around which the subject orients his way.'[10] Lacan's concept of extimacy has been employed to problematize, challenge and transcend the traditional psychological distinction between exteriority and interiority. Psychoanalyst David Pavón-Cuéllar elaborated on this non-distinction:

> …extimacy indicates the nondistinction and essential identity between the dual terms of the outside and the deepest inside, the exterior and the most interior of the psyche, the outer world and the inner world of the subject, culture and the core of personality, the social and the mental, surface and depth, behaviour and thoughts or feelings.[11]

Pavón-Cuéllar's expanded terminology for outside and inside is utilised across this thesis to illustrate the expansive field of the avatar that mediates and manifests forms of extimacy. This thesis also acknowledges the trope of the extimate avatar as a communicative form, which reflects what psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron describes as 'a tendency that is essential to the human being and consists of the desire to communicate the inner world to the outer world, a communication that would enrich intimacy.'[12] This thesis argues that the concept of extimacy and the trope of the avatar was given new currency through the proliferation of digital platforms, online applications and new technologies that characterised the first decade of mobile internet.

Although Lacan did not extend the concept of extimacy to encompass technologies, the concept has been utilised to examine the relationship between technologies and embodiment. Philosophy scholar Hub Zwart argues that technologically reproducible gadgets, wearables and bio-implants, such as smart watches, biochips and neuro-implants, have already begun to enter our intimate life-worlds and bodies. Zwart argues that, rather than describe these forms as ‘intimate’ technologies, they are better understood as ‘extimate’ technologies, as objects that are both external, embedded and foreign, life enhancing and intrusive.[13] As many of the extimate technologies such as smartphones connect to the global networks of the internet, they allow a constant presence of the avatar and processes of self-monitoring and self-surveillance.[14] Drawing on the work of sociologist Sherry Turkle and her notion of technologies as relational artefacts that demand engagement, Zwart suggests extimate technologies including the avatar are becoming us:

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[10] Jacques Lacan (1959-1960) cited in Pavon-Cuellear, 'Extimacy,' 662.
[11] Pavón-Cuéllar, 662.
[12] Tisseron, 'Intimacy and Extimacy,' 83-91.

> New technologies are pervading the lifeworld, they are becoming *us*; the concept of a prosthetic no longer captures the intimate relations people have with these wearable machines, almost continuous with our bodies.[15]

The concept of extimacy is explored throughout this thesis in relation to the trope of the extimate avatar as produced by extimate technology, as a form of relationality and practices of self-disclosure. To examine the trope of the extimate avatar, this thesis utilises the psychoanalytic works of Lacan throughout and also in relation to a range of phenomenological, sociological, postcolonial and Indigenous theoretical writings that explore identity, corporeality, gender, embodiment, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Through this broad theoretical framework, this thesis examines the work of artists who engage with the performative materiality of social media, YouTube, Second Life, gaming and Indigenous applications. The main artists examined include: Janet Lilo (New Zealand), Erica Scourti (United Kingdom), Oliver Laric (Austria), Amie Siegel (United States of America/Germany), Natalie Bookchin (United States of America), Eva and Marco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org) (United States of America), Cao Fei (China), Alan Kwan (Hong Kong), Momo Pixel (United States of America), Feng Mengbo (China), Rachael Rakena (New Zealand), Skawennati (Canada) and Leah King-Smith (Australia).

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[13] Zwart, ‘Extimate.’ 24.

[14] Zwart, 39.

[15] Zwart, 28.

## Chapter Summary

### Chapter One: Social media: constructing extimate avatars as digitally networked bodies.

Chapter One examines the trope of the extimate avatar and its impact and influence on contemporary artists who engage with the networked environment of social media. The trope of the extimate avatar is framed as recurring practices of self-portraiture, which include profile pages, selfies and vlog-style videos; these embodied self-representations create ‘digitally networked bodies’. This chapter introduces Lacan’s concept of extimacy to understand the networked nature of extimate avatars that exists across online and offline networks. This is illustrated through a close examination of the materiality and dynamics of the interactive installation *Top 16*, 2007-2018 by Janet Lilo. Through an examination of the components of this installation, this chapter will explore the ways in which the extimate avatar reconfigures notions of private and public, drawing on Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical model. The concept of extimacy is then extended to acknowledge the intimate relationship between technology and the body, which is encouraged through extimate forms of self-portraiture, such as selfies. Art Historian Amelia Jones’ concept of a technology of embodiment is employed to explore the extimacy between the body and technologies in relation to the work of Erica Scourti, who documents her bodily engagement with the algorithms of google and the online application CamFind. This chapter concludes by weaving together the embodied sociality and technologically entwined notions of the extimate avatar to consider the gaze. This is explored through a series of digital self-portraits by Lilo, utilising Lacan’s theory of the gaze.

### Chapter Two: Broadcast Yourself: Extimate avatars on YouTube

Chapter Two examines the work of contemporary artists who appropriate and re-present vernacular video genres of YouTube in the creation of new video art works. It will argue that these works highlight the trope of the avatar as extimate practices of self-representation and performance that is perpetuated through the participatory culture of YouTube. The chapter begins with a brief history of video art, focusing specifically on its relationship with television as a precedent for artistic engagement with the YouTube platform. The seminal essay by Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Medium of Video is Narcissism,’ is also discussed in the beginning of this chapter as a theoretical foundation for examining YouTube as a platform for extimate forms of self-expression and externally projected and broadcasted images of identity. A brief history of YouTube is provided to contextualise the genres of vernacular video and the engagement of the contemporary artists in this chapter. The notion of extimacy and the trope of an extimate avatar is framed as a communicative desire to share one’s inner world, to ‘broadcast yourself’. This notion of extimacy is explored in relation to the micro-celebrity in the Chroma-keyed music video of Oliver Laric and the remix videos of Janet Lilo that compile multiple cover performances. This chapter also examines the ways in which artists such as Amie Siegel explore the codified nature of bedroom performances, and how the notion of extimacy shapes new collective perceptions and constructions of gender as well as concepts of private and public space. To conclude, this chapter looks at the practice of extimacy as personal yet public testimonials in the work of Natalie Bookchin, in her amassing of vlogs that give volume to the confessional culture of YouTube as a site of individual and collective expression and affirmation.

### Chapter Three: Second Life: the artist as avatar

This chapter examines the work of contemporary artists who create art work in the virtual world of Second Life and have contributed to the shaping the trope of the avatar. It argues that these artists have given rise to the figure of the avatar as an extimate extension of the artist. This extimate relationship between artist and avatar is explored through the concept of extimacy and by drawing on phenomenological theories of the body schema and body image. This chapter begins by providing a brief history of artistic explorations of virtual realities as ‘image spaces,’ navigable first by the cyborg and later the avatar. Several pioneering virtual reality works from the 1990s are discussed to provide the conceptual framing for later explorations of virtual worlds through the figure of the avatar. This is demonstrated through discussion of the work of Eva Franco and Franco Mattes, who have given visibility to the figure of the avatar through their ‘pictures of self-portraits’ and remediated synthetic performances of iconic performances in-world. A major focus of this chapter is the work of Cao Fei and her Second Life avatar China Tracey that model the doubly embodied extimate relationship between artist and avatar. Notions of extimacy are first explored in Fei’s *Cosplay* series, to illustrate some of the formative ideas of identity construction, play and dress that become formative aspects of Fei’s Second Life works. Discussion of these works employ Goffman’s dramaturgical model to illustrate how the trope of the extimate avatar enables an externalisation of identity and experience. The extimate relationship between the body and the avatar is explored further in the Second Life works of Cao Fei and China Tracey that include machinima, in-world art events and installations offline. By employing Lacan’s theories of the mirror stage, this chapter concludes with a close analysis of *i.Mirror* and *RMB* City to further examine the extimate relationship between artist and avatar. This chapter concludes by proposing the reversal of this relationship of avatar as artist.

### Chapter Four: Extimate avatar and interactive art games.

This chapter examines the trope of the extimate avatar in interactive art games by artists and practitioners that utilise games as an artistic medium. By employing the notion of extimacy and avatars as extimate forms, these artists utilise games as a medium to reflect on personal memory, inspire collective action, and create alternative experiences of political histories. This chapter offers an overview of the art history of games and artgames as a movement that coincides with the beginnings of mobile internet. It is structured on a close analysis of three interactive art games by artist and game designer Alan Kwan, artist and pixel designer Momo Pixel and video game artist Feng Mengbo. The evocative use of gaming is explored through the interactive art game *The Hallway* by Alan Kwan and the use of the first-person perspective as a vehicle through which players play as themselves. The extimate connection between the player and avatar is explored further online in the interactive art game *Hair Nah* by Momo Pixel, an example of the political nature of gameplay. This work is contextualised in relation to online collective action and the impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The political and transformational use of games is extended to consider the use of modding (modification) as a tool to offer new perspectives on political histories through gameplay.

This is explored through the interactive art game mod *Long March Restart*, by video game artist Feng Mengbo, that explores and questions historic events through gameplay. The discussion of each game will include close analysis of the gameplay, game narrative and game environment to illustrate the functionality and significance of the extimate avatar-player relationship. Critical to this chapter is the avatar as a performed entity that is engaged in play as part of a feedback loop that connects the player with the game in ways that reflect the overall intention of the artists and game designers.

### Chapter Five: Indigenous avatars

This chapter examines the work of Indigenous artists who employ the trope of the avatar and the materiality of digital platforms to create extimate forms of Indigeneity. As the theoretical framework for this chapter, a definition of 'indigenising' is addressed to frame the use of indigenous knowledge, narrative and methodologies of the artists in this chapter. The notion of extimacy is reframed by utilising indigenous frameworks such as 'two-eyed seeing' and the Māori concept of 'pae,' which inform notions of interiority, exteriority and relationality. To provide historical context for this chapter, a brief history of Indigenous peoples online will be discussed, to situate the work of contemporary artists within an indigenous public sphere. The role of artists within the efforts to indigenise 'cyberspace' is illustrated in the video installations of Rachael Rakena, who proposes spatial concepts such as 'pae' for exploring cyberspace and the medium of digital communications within a specifically Māori context. The role of artist in indigenising 'cyberspace' will be illustrated through discussion of the project *CyberPowWow*, which pioneered the creation of an 'aboriginally-determined space in cyberspace' in the 1990s. This work functions as the keystone to examine the Second Life works by Skawennati, where the trope of the extimate avatar and machinima realise the decolonial concepts of delinking and survivance. Notions of survivance and an indigenous temporality is explored further in the work of Leah-King Smith, who situates the trope of the avatar within the holistic philosophy of The Dreaming. Collectively these artists redefine the trope of the avatar as a form of Indigenous extimacy that draws on Indigenous concepts of space, time and relationality.

## 1. Social Media: constructing extimate avatars as digitally networked bodies

This chapter examines the trope of the extimate avatar in social media and its impact and influence on contemporary artists in the first decade of the mobile internet era. The popularity of social networking websites and social media applications helped to fashion the trope of the avatar and extimate experiences of identity through forms of self-portraiture. Self-portraiture in this chapter is conceptualised as a construction that produces representations that inform an individual's self-identity. Self-portraits are explored as depictions and recurring processes that Timothy Gorichanaz describes as 'bringing oneself forth over time'.[16] On different social media platforms and applications, the recurring practices of self-portraiture have expanded the trope of the extimate avatar to include selfies, social networking profile pages and YouTube videos. The ongoing maintenance of these extimate avatars creates an extimate relationship between users and digital platforms and online applications, which is reflected in the work of Janet Lilo and Erica Scourti. Through a close examination of Janet Lilo's project *Top 16,* 2007-2018, this chapter will illustrate the emergence of the profile page as an embodied and modified extimate avatar that enables the experiences of identity as a digitally networked body. The concept of a digitally networked and technologically produced body is also explored in the webcam video and moving image works of Erica Scourti. By examining her self-portrait video works, this chapter will highlight the ways in which bodies and technologies are intimately or extimately entwined by employing art historian Amelia Jones' concept of self-portraiture as a technology of embodiment. This concept is also explored in relation to performativity in the digitally enhanced portraits of Lilo. To contextualise these works, this chapter will address how the trope of the extimate avatar is produced and its functionality within the digital applications and online technologies from which these artists draw specifically, social networking websites and Google Adwords algorithms. Collectively these works reflect the ways that the materiality of the extimate avatar in social media provides a means through which identities could be constructed, performed and experienced as digitally networked bodies.

Since the early 2000s, the internet has experienced a huge paradigm shift in terms of its function and use, prompting significant shifts in identity construction.[17] This transformation of the web as an interactive social space fostered new activities and modes of communication referred to as social media. The term 'social media' is an umbrella term for internet-based communication that allows people to have conversations, create web content and share information online. Social media can take multiple forms such as Twitter, blogging video-sharing websites, photo-sharing websites and social networking websites. Through social networking websites users employ the concept of extimacy to bridge their offline and online lives, creating extimate avatars in the form of 'selfies', videos and profile pages. The circulation of these forms on social networking websites emphasised the communicative nature of extimate avatars as digitally networked bodies.

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[16] Gorichanaz, 'Self-Portrait, Selfie, Self: Nots on Identity and Documentation in the Digital Age,' 1.

[17] Weaver and Morrison, 'Social Networking,' 97.

The impact of social networking websites and social media on contemporary art transformed the art world. It had a direct impact on the ways in which artists and institutions develop and present work and how they build and communicate with new audiences. In terms of art education, social media provide new opportunities for learning through participation and dialogue.[18] The greater connectivity across social media also ushered in new levels of accessibility to artists, collections and exhibitions. The latter – the ability to view art and tour institutions online through institutional websites or platforms such as Google Arts & Culture – also increased public accessibility to art.[19] These initiatives promoted art as it became more publicly and globally accessible and emphasised the viewing of art through digital images as a social activity.

In addition to participating on social networking websites, several contemporary artists responded creatively, adopting the methodologies and dynamics of social media. This included artists creating internet-based art works, and the establishment of new modes of practice such as prosurfer works. Prosurfer, a shortened term for 'professional surfing,' describe the creation of works through the method of browsing and republishing digital material as art works online, as blogs or web pages.[20] In the offline context of the gallery, artists also adopted and responded to new visual modes, such as 'selfies,' whilst others appropriated digital content as material for offline works. As will be illustrated in the examples in this chapter, the appropriation of digital content from social networking websites and online applications also transported their associated modes and viewing and engagement into art practice. These installations redefined notions of visibility and highlighted the nature of identity as intersubjective and networked across virtual and real engagement.[21]

### 1.1 A definition of social networking websites (SNS)

Social networking websites transformed the face-to-face communication of building and maintaining social networks into new expansive online spaces. Nicole Ellison and danah boyd define social network sites as web-based services that comprise three characteristics. First, social networking websites allow individuals to construct a public profile or semi-profile within a bounded system. Secondly, they allow the display of an individual's network as a list of other users with whom they share a connection. Lastly, they allow users to explore the network and view their list of connections and those made by others, within the social network system.[22] Social networking websites enable users to create new social networks that would not otherwise be made and, as many scholars have pointed out, they also allow online articulation of offline connections and community affiliations.[23] For many users, social networking websites affirmed their existing network, and they were communicating primarily with people they already knew.[24]

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[18] Castro, 'Learning and Teaching Art through Social Media,' 158.

[19] Google Arts & Culture launched in 2001 in partnership with 17 cultural institutions.

[20] Cornell, 'Professional Surfer.'

[21] Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networking Generation,* 12.

[22] boyd and Ellison, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,' 211.

[23] Kavanaugh et al., 'Community Networks: Where Offline Communities Meet Online,'

[24] boyd and Ellison use the term 'social network sites' rather than 'networking' to reflect this fact. They argue that 'networking' describes looking to meet new people; however, they acknowledge that many users are

Social networking websites were a global phenomenon, building geographically specific audiences. The very first social networking website called *SixDegrees* launched in 1997; it allowed users to create profiles, as well as list and navigate their connections and school affiliations.[25] *SixDegrees* attracted millions of users; however, it closed in 2000 due to many people lacking internet access, which limited social networks. Social networking websites would develop through the millennium and surge in 2003.[26] In the United States of America, *MySpace* launched in 2003 and was incredibly successful, aided in part by the early adoption of the social networking website by the music industry. In 2008, *MySpace* launched a new feature called *MySpace Music,* a service that allowed users to create playlists and stream artists' catalogues on their *MySpace* pages free.[27] Other successful websites relevant to this chapter include *Friendster,* which was popular in the Pacific Islands, and *Bebo,* which became popular in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia.[28]

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communicating with their own extended network. For clarity, this chapter will use the term social networking websites as this is the common term used by the websites themselves.

[25] boyd and Ellison note this was the first social networking website to do so.

[26] The landscape of social-networking websites diversified and included socially-oriented, professional and interest-specific sites. At the same time, and inspired by the rise in user-created content, other social media sharing platforms began to adopt features of social networking websites, for example, Flicker (photo sharing) and YouTube (video sharing), who both adopted profile pages.

[27] Mandell, 'My Space Music: A Forgotten Casualty of the Streaming Wars.'

[28] boyd, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,' 218.

**Figure 1.1.** danah boyd and Nicole Ellison, Timeline showing growth of Social Networking Websites.

## 1.2 The profile page as extimate avatar

Social networking websites encouraged users to create and experience identity through the exitimate forms of profile pages that functioned as their self-representation in the networked environment of these websites. Profile pages enabled users to engage in recurring self-portraiture practices that drew on their corporeal experiences and the networks of their offline lives. Profile pages on social networking websites require users to enter their biographical data by filling out a template, similar to that used on dating websites. boyd notes that the profile pages drew on the style of profiles on dating service websites that required users to share demographic details, tastes and interests, a photograph and an open-ended text describing the type of person they would like to meet.[29] As will be addressed in this chapter, profile pages extend the subjectivity of individuals into a new networked environment and expand the trope of the extimate avatar. B. Coleman advocates for the expanded definition of the avatar, beyond the prosthetic computer-generated figure controlled by an individual, to include a range of social media. Her redefinition of the avatar was an attempt to encompass a broader scope of 'avatar activity' in relation to what she defines as 'networked media.' She states:

> I use the term 'networked media' to describe technologies that are connected to a distributed transmission network such as the Internet or cell towers. In such a case, 'networked' speaks to a technical affordance. However, I also use the term to invoke a cultural sense of connectivity with one another.[30]

Borrowing Cole's expansive field of the avatar, the profile pages and their components including profile photographs can be understood as extimate avatars that are visually and technologically 'networked'.

Profile pages require users to extend and externalise themselves and their networks through different components of the page. The creation of profile pages begins by filling out an online form that contains a basic set of questions which includes demographic details such as age, location, date of birth, gender and interests. As part of the form, users are requested to upload a profile photograph, which is commonly a photograph of the user; however, the selection is at the discretion of the user.[31] This basic format of the profile page can be further customised with other features and enhancements, depending on the social networking website. After establishing a profile page, users are prompted to explore and build their social networks by identifying people they know. Alternatively, users can select people they do not know but would like to connect with. The nomenclature for connections varies between sites: a few common terms used include 'friends', 'contacts' or 'followers'. However, there are instances of social networking where connections are not reciprocal and are one-directional, as in the case of 'fans' or 'followers.'

Development and public display of connections is a critical component of identity on social networking websites and is included on the profile page. This list of friends on some social networking websites can be customised by the user as a public display of their social network. It typically appears as a list of thumbnail images of profile photographs with the individuals' names underneath. Essentially, each thumbnail is a link directly to the profile page of that user, allowing others to access their page through the profile pages of their networks (Figure 1.2). In addition to appearing on the page as a 'friend.' they are also able to contribute to the page in the form of open-ended text that appears on the profile page as comments that can be read publicly by other users.[32] Thus profile pages are created by the intersubjective relationships between 'friends' and other users.

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[29] boyd, 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 123.
[30] Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation*, 12.
[31] The nomenclature for profile pages and their features will differ between websites.

**Figure 1.2** Facebook Profile Page, 2010. Screenshot by author.

Profile pages function as the extimate avatars of users and are evolving forms of self-representation. Ongoing maintenance of profile pages is encouraged through diaristic functions that enable the user to 'speak' to the network. Other common changes on profile pages include the revision and uploading of new profile photographs and other multimedia, both of which contribute to the morphing visual identity of the profile page. Sociologist Erving Goffman defines these processes of performance, review and adjustment as 'Impression Management.' By employing a dramaturgical approach, Goffman frames interactions as 'performances' shaped by the environment and audience. By employing this dramaturgical mode, the profile page can be framed as a performance that is constructed to provide others with 'impressions' that reflect the intention and goals of the individual.[33] These intentions are shaped by social norms that emerge from the networked conditions of social networking websites. By viewing profile pages, users develop a sense of what types of information and imagery are appropriate expressions of identity.[34]

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[32] On several social networking websites, the visibility and privacy settings can be controlled by the user. On some social networking websites it is possible for the user to create customised visibility where only select groups or individuals can see content.

[33] Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life,* 8.

The almost daily impression management of profile pages on social networking websites extended the body to the avatar of profile pages as a critical site of identity. Boyd (2007), in her study of teenage youth on social networking website *MySpace,* describes the profile page as a 'digital body' that individuals 'write into being.'[35] Further, she states that teenagers create 'digital bodies' for their primary audience, which is largely their offline network of friends and peers. With this specific audience in mind, according to Goffman's notion of impression management, the teenagers were inclined to present themselves in ways that they felt would be received and validated by their peers.[36] Thus the actions of creating and managing a profile page are shaped increasingly by an 'imagined audience' that is connected to their social world and lives offline.[37] The embodied nature of profile pages reveals the nature of extimate avatars in social networking websites that enable users create what can more accurately be described as digitally networked bodies.

The indexical relationship between the offline body (and their associated networks) and the 'digital networked body' of a profile page can be understood as a form of extimacy. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's term extimacy describes the fluid relationship between what is interior or intimate and what is exterior – inside and outside. Building upon this, psychoanalyst Jacques Alain-Miller suggests that the interior as the 'intimate' always has a quality of exteriority. Further, he argues that extimacy should not be considered contrary to intimacy. Rather, it should be understood as the 'intimate other' that is like a foreign body, a parasite, as illustrated in his simple diagram of a circle within another circle (Figure 1.3).[38] The parasitic nature of the 'intimate other' helps to frame the 'digital bodies' of profile pages as intimate forms of identity that are at their core shaped by their exteriorities. Alain-Miller argues that extimacy can be equivalent to the unconscious itself that is the 'Other,' and refers to Lacan who states: 'this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my identity to myself, it is he who stirs me.'[39] The relationship between the 'Other,' as proposed by Lacan, highlights the ways in which the external profile page and its components (profile photographs, thumbnail images) are intimately tied to the identity of its users.

**Figure 1.3.** Reproduction of extimacy diagram by Alain Miller. Diagram by author.

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[34] boyd 'Why Youth Heart Social Network Sites: The role of networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 123.

[35] boyd and Ellison, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,' 13

[36] boyd and Ellison, 13.

[37] boyd, 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 14.

[38] Miller, 'Extimit,' 123.

[39] Lacan (Écrits, 172) quoted in Miller, 'Extimit', 123.

### 1.3 The interface of social networking and contemporary art

The digital materiality of social networking websites has provided inspiration and material for contemporary artists such as Janet Lilo. Her practice reflects an ongoing exploration of popular culture, including hip hop culture and self-portrait practices of social networking websites. Lilo was an early adopter of social networking websites and quickly incorporated their aesthetics into her contemporary art practice.[40] Her body of works includes internet-based moving image works, experimental documentary remix videos, sculpture and installation. In her practice, Lilo draws on the dynamics and methodology of online platforms, evident in her appropriation and remixing of content from online platforms such as YouTube and social networking websites. Her artistic engagement with social networking websites offers an almost concurrent commentary and insight into the ways in which social networking websites create new experiences of identity through the trope of the extimate avatar. This is evident in her artworks but also in social media content created for her private social networking website accounts.

In 2005, as the JENESYS Artist in Residence in Sapporo, Japan, Lilo created a series of six vlogs (video logs) entitled *Janeto in Japan,* which were published on YouTube.[41] In keeping with the style of vlogs, each video is a diary-like monologue of Lilo speaking straight to the camera, sharing her observations of Japan and the activities of her day. Interspersed throughout the vlogs are short video clip excerpts, photographs of events and insights into her art-making. In the fifth vlog, Lilo shares her documentation of the nocturnal phenomena of youth hip hop dancing and breakdancing in front of the storefront windows of closed stores in Tanuki Koji Arcade. In this vlog, Lilo shares her observations of this practice through photographs and excerpts of hip hop troupes and solo dancers. Also included in the vlog is an interview with Yaguchi Masanao, a jewellery store owner in Tanuki Koji arcade, gauging his opinion on the dancers in the arcade. In the final section of the vlog, she includes footage of a solo dancer named Coji, which begins with a brief conversation before she proceeds to dance towards the storefront window. In the footage, Coji moves to the music of her headphones, retreating into a personal headspace and engaging only with her reflection, seemingly oblivious to Lilo and her public surroundings. Coji's dancing is largely silent and is overlaid with Lilo's commentary, and then the fading in of the song on her headphones. In this short excerpt, Lilo documents a phenomenon that symbolises a much larger cultural blurring of public and private space.[42]

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[40] In 2018, Lilo commented that she has largely withdrawn from social media as it had influenced her photography practice. Lopesi, 'Bananarama,' 26.

[41] Lilo, 'Janet Lilo Sapporo Artist in Residence Vlog1.'

[42] Janet repurposed this footage for the documentary work *The Tanuki Koji Dance Project (*2010), exhibited at Whitespace Contemporary Art in Auckland.

**Figure 1.4.** Janet Lilo, *Janet Lilo Sapporo Artist in Residence Vlog5,* 2009, (Vlog, 9mins 58 seconds). Screenshot by author.

The concept of extimacy as the non-distinction between private and public can be seen across Lilo's practice. The concept of the 'interface' was the conceptual framework for another online series entitled *The Interface Project,* created in 2010-2011 for the video-sharing platform YouTube. The series comprised seven videos of informal street-interviews shot around public spaces in the suburbs of Auckland city. The interviews gauged local opinion on the proposed changes to local government, followed by a series of questions that tested their popular knowledge. Lilo polled her interviewees about their preference between movie rivals 'Team Edward or Team Jacob?' and hip-hop rivals 'Tupac or Biggie?' These questions represent tropes of good versus evil and east versus west in popular culture. In line with Lilo's aesthetic, the videos feature technical characteristics of her remix videos, with layers of music videos and text spliced throughout. The title of the project references the technological interface and the act of face-to-face dialogue with another person, which is increasingly mediated. In the series, Lilo also acts as an 'interface' for her local community and the global public of the platform of YouTube.

## 1.4 Extimate avatars in *Top 16*, 2007-2018, Janet Lilo

The notion of the interface of the internet, more specifically the profile pages of social networking websites, was also the inspiration for Lilo's installation *Top 16* (2007-2018). This installation was an ongoing investigation into identity construction on social networking websites, which required Lilo to browse numerous social networking websites. The core of the installation features collections of components taken directly from social networking website profile pages, which reflect hours of browsing through her social networks.  Over time, the multimedia installation has evolved and has included appropriated content from social networking websites, sculpture, cardboard screens, and picnic tables and remix videos. The installation was first exhibited in 2007 in Auckland and has been shown ten times in total, with its final iteration acquired for the national collection at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Each iteration of the work is site-specific and has included different configurations of the elements of the work. At Webb's Gallery in Auckland, Lilo adapted the work to fit within an elevator space. Over the course of its exhibition history, Lilo has continually added components to the installation, amassing an archive of material drawn specifically from other social networking websites.

The ever-evolving installation charts Lilo's engagement with social networking websites and the evolving nature of the trope of the extimate avatar. Aggregating content over a twelve-year period, the installation also documents the wider techno-social interplay, where embodied movements, gestures and behaviours were increasingly performed through social networking websites.[43] Whilst initially inspired by the social networking website Bebo, it has expanded to include other social networking websites, including the now-defunct MySpace and Facebook. As an offline gallery-based work, *Top 16* demonstrates how identity and embodiment were increasingly shaped through the networked experiences of individuals across online and offline spaces. As an interactive artwork, *Top 16* demonstrates the ways identities on social networking websites are co-constitutive, and produce one another.[44] In analysing Lilo's work as a commentary on the evolving notion of identity and being 'embodied', Jason Farman argues that 'we must simultaneously ask how bodies are enacted in and with space.'[45]

The title of the work and the installation itself were inspired by the artist's observation of the local popularity of the networking website Bebo amongst Māori and Pacific youth in Auckland. 'Top 16' refers to a specific feature on Bebo where users were able to rank their top sixteen 'friends' that appeared as a list of thumbnail images on the profile page. Bebo was a free social networking website, launched in 2005 by Michael and Xochi Birch, and was in operation until 2013.[46] Similar to other social networking websites, Bebo required users to create a profile page that contained the basic biographical data and a personal statement under the heading 'Me, Myself and I.' Other open-text fields on the profile page allowed users to share their interests, such as their favourite sports, music and films. Other headings asked users to share personal information by completing sentence prompts such as 'Most scared of …' and 'Happiest when ….' A key component of the profile page was the inclusion of user metrics, which appeared underneath the biographical data. This included the number of times the profile page had been viewed by others, the time and date when they were 'last active,' and how many 'hearts' they had received from other users. In addition to the 'Top 16' friends list feature, this particular section placed emphasis on being 'seen' and validated by others on the network.

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[43] Conversely technologies can also 'perform' through the agency of humans who share, like and circulate content. Martina et al. as addressed by Leeker, Schipper and Beyes, 'Performativity, Performance Studies and Digital Cultures,' 9-18.

[44] Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*, 18.

[45] Farman, 18.

[46] Bebo has relaunched several times until it was acquired by Amazon in 2019. In January 2021, Bebo announced it would be returning as a new site developed by its original founders 'Bebo is Back.'

Profile pages and associated activities on Bebo evokes boyd's notion of the profile page as a 'digital body.' Profile pages on Bebo utilised bodily language to describe different features, for example, the use of backgrounds ad layouts called 'skins.' Graphic skins were examples of online graphic user interfaces (GUI) that allowed users to customise the visual appearance of their profile pages. Graphic skins could be shared amongst users, a practice that will be discussed in the following section. Conceptually, skins also helped to create a reference to the physical body and the outermost epidermal body layer. Another example of the bodily metaphors used on profile pages was the practice of giving graphic heart icons as a symbol of affection and connection. Bebo encouraged this activity by assigning three hearts to each user to give to others on their social network. The graphic heart icons would appear as a comment on the profile page and a tally of hearts appeared as part of the biographical section. These features helped to anthropomorphise the profile page as a digitally networked body and an extension of the subjectivities of the user.

### 1.5 The materiality of Bebo

The notion of the profile page as an extimate digital body was emphasised by the application of graphic skins referred simply as 'Bebo Skins.' Bebo Skins were much easier than the wallpapers in MySpace, which required knowledge of HTML code.[47] Bebo profile pages had an embedded option that allowed users to 'change' their skin quite easily by selecting pre-made options, or to create their own using the feature 'roll your own.' This feature allowed users to create their own skins by uploading their own graphics created by basic paint applications and image editing tools of their choice.[48] Once uploaded, skins would be stored in a user's 'favourites' folder, submitted to the social networking website for consideration as part of the 'featured layouts' in the skins section. Creating and changing skins became a core part of the impression management of users on Bebo, as users were able to create highly personalised expressions. It also created an artistic practice for some users who shared their works in forums dedicated to the creation of skins, and some monetised their creations.[49]

The popularity of graphic skins on Bebo created a culture of sharing that responded to the needs of individuals to signal affiliations and identities as part of the profile pages. The sharing of skins also enabled affiliations and connections to be made that were evident amongst Māori and Pacific youth in New Zealand, who were described by producer Lisa Taouma as an emerging 'Brown Bebo Nation.'[50] Amongst this growing audience, skins became a critical vehicle to express genealogical connections and affiliations online that reflected their social networks offline. For example, graphic skins were used to express diaspora identities and connections to their homelands and their specific village (Figure

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[47] boyd, 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 6. In this study of Youth on Myspace, boyd noted that a copy/paste culture emerged around the use of wallpapers. This allowed users with very little HTML coding knowledge to add wallpapers to their profile pages.

[48] Common image editing tools include Adobe Photoshop and free open-source image editors such as GNU Image Manipulation programme (GIMP).

[49] An example of skins forum where tutorials and tips were shared can still be found online on user-created blog sites dedicated to displaying and sharing skins.

[50] Taouma, 'Janet Lilo Bebo Art.'

1.5). For some New Zealand-based users, skins were used to express connections to villages by using icons and symbols, such as the mascot of the dove used by a Tongan user that relates to a specific village of Vaini in Tonga. In another example, a thematic graphic skin was shared amongst a network of globally dispersed users to identify their genealogical ties as a family. The imagery of this skin included family photographs, religious symbols and gang-inspired symbols of blue bandanas (Figure 1.6).

**Figure 1.5.** Tongan village themed Bebo Skin, 2010. Screenshot by author.

**Figure 1.6**. Family themed Bebo Skin, 2010. Screenshot by author.

Skins were also utilised as a vehicle to record bereavement online in the creation of memorial-themed skins. Similar to memorials in physical public spaces, forms of online memorials can also build communities, as they serve as a symbol of collectively shared history and relationship.[51] They can also serve as a medium for announcements, informing other users of the death of an individual through its circulation across profile pages. Although ephemeral, the use of skins as memorials helped users to express grief online, and generated a circulation of content related to an individual. In addition, the sharing of memorial skins amongst different users also built a visual community that demonstrated a connection to the deceased and a collective network of mourning. In Figure 1.7, memorial skin is employed by a female user and the profile photograph is of the deceased as a visual memorial. This example reflects the ways in which skins and profile pages enabled new visual forms of mourning online.

**Figure 1.7.** Memorial-themed Bebo Skin, 2010. Screenshot by author.

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[51] Katsiaryna and Knautz, *Facets of Facebook: Use and Users*, 221.

### 1.6 The profile page as a spatial template

In the installation *Top 16*, Lilo draws from the rich materiality of social networking websites to create an installation that harnesses the interactive and communicative dynamics of profile pages on social networking websites. This was highlighted in the spatial layout of *Top 16,* which takes the profile page as a spatial and conceptual template for the installation. Lilo's gallery-based social networking interface utilises the profile page as the format of display and the mechanisms for experiencing and viewing the artwork. In an early study of social networking website Friendster in 2006, scholars Danah Boyd and Jeffrey Heer (2006) argued that a profile page was not a static representation of the 'self' but a communicative body 'in conversation' with other represented bodies.[52] These networked conditions and the concept of the profile page as a communicative digital body is evoked by Lilo's installation through the interactive components and the spatial layout of the installation.

The concept of profile pages as being communicative digital bodies that 'conversate' provides a useful framework for analysing Lilo's installation. As boyd and Heer utilise the concept of conversations as a framework to 'weave performance and interpretation' that allows for a 'multimodal exchange of useful information.'[53] Further, they note that conversations are site-specific and that the context in which they occur plays an active role in the conversation itself, stating 'the architectural structure of digital life alters the ways in which conversations can and do occur.'[54] This is evident in the spatial structure of *Top 16*, which emulates the profile page and its conceptual framing that shapes modes of viewing and interaction. The different iterations of the installation have emulated the activities of the profile pages. This includes interactive components that emulate the activity of writing comments, browsing through profile photographs, and watching videos.

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[52] boyd and Heer, 'Profiles as Conversation: Networked Identity Performance on Friendster,' 394.

[53] boyd and Heer, 394.

[54] boyd and Heer, 394.

**Figure 1.8.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, picnic tables, brick drawings, video, cardboard screens), 2007, St Paul Street Gallery. Installation view of interactive picnic table.

**Figure 1.9.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, picnic tables, brick drawings, video, cardboard screens), 2007, St Paul Street Gallery. Installation view of cardboard projector and screen.

By presenting the spatial structure of the profile page out of context, *Top 16* afforded a closer examination of the kinds of communicative modes that flow fluidly across offline and online space. Lilo's presentation of online content demonstrated her acute awareness of the ways in which profile pages and social networking at large connect real and online experiences. In the second iteration of *Top 16* at Fresh Gallery Ōtara in 2008, Lilo created sculptural elements that were symbolic of the interrelation of online and offline space. In one section of the installation, Lilo juxtaposed a collection of printed digital drawings made on Bebo through the 'whiteboard' feature alongside a physical brick wall, which echoed the display of drawings. The whiteboard feature on the Bebo profile page allowed users to build a wall of whiteboard drawings by clicking 'add a brick'. The playful and humoristic gesture points to the different meanings of building a brick wall online and offline, where the physical brick wall connotes a barrier and the brick wall of whiteboard drawings is part of the building of connections in the context of social networking websites.

**Figure 1.10**. Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, picnic tables, brick drawings, bricks, heart sculpture, video, monitors), 2011, Fresh Gallery Ōtara. Installation view of brick wall.

**Figure 1.11.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, picnic tables, brick drawings, bricks, heart sculpture, video, monitors), 2011, Fresh Gallery Ōtara. Detail of brick wall drawings.

Also made visible in *Top 16* were the nuances of language and the new meanings created through social networking websites. In the second iteration of the installation at Fresh Gallery, Ōtara, Lilo propped up a large red heart sculpture against the wall. The heart sculpture was a reference to the feature of profile pages called ‘share the luv,’ and the daily practice of giving graphic hearts through messages to their social network. Initially, users were given one heart per day; however, this later increased to three hearts per day in response to growing popularity. These much-coveted hearts on Bebo became indicators of popularity rather than the common connotations of the heart symbol as expressions of love or admiration. The use of hearts as an indicator of popularity was highlighted on the profile page itself, which included a metric of how many hearts an individual had received. Within the installation, the heart sculpture became a dual symbol of the emotion of love and the practice of giving ‘luv’ on Bebo.[55]

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[55] In the final iteration of *Top 16* in 2018, Lilo brought this reference back into the installation in the form of a neon light work of the phrase ‘share the love,’ created in the same neuropol type used for the brand Bebo. At the time, Bebo was defunct and this component was a type of homage to the social networking website. It also introduced a new sculptural element into the installation that reflected Lilo’s recent practice, which has frequently included Neon lighting as part of installations and public sculptures.

**Figure 1.12.** *Top 16,* 2011, Janet Lilo, Fresh Gallery Ōtara. Installation view of heart sculpture.

In the first two iterations of *Top 16,* the references to Bebo spoke to a very local social networking trend and to the networking activities of New Zealand audiences. However, throughout the various iterations, Lilo has included references to global networks and global popular culture. This occurs quite prominently in the body of video works created by Lilo that have featured in the installation as the 'video component' of a profile page. This component of the installation functioned as an archive of her video practice that includes moving image works and interview footage. In the later iterations, the video component of the installation has largely comprised her 'collaborations' with YouTube cover artists.[56] This growing archive of video in *Top 16* paralleled the popularity of YouTube as a platform for sharing video and the creation of user-generated content. Further, it also reflects the impact of YouTube in terms of the circulation of localised content for new global audiences.

In the first iteration of *Top 16* (2007), the video content provided a historical context for the localisation of global social networking websites in Aotearoa New Zealand. For this inaugural iteration, Lilo took her own archive and displayed works she made from 2004 onwards that documented the cultural impact of American popular culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. At this time in her practice, she began making experimental video works and documentaries using a simple digital camcorder. This included *On Queenz*, which documented ad-hoc rap performers by nighttime partygoers in downtown Auckland, and her extensive documentation of her friend and colleague 'Jigga Jo thug.'[57] In the first iteration, Lilo included videos of 'Jigga Jo Thug' performing passionate lip sync performances in a domestic setting, using a hairbrush mic. These videos are early forms of 'bedroom performance,' a genre of user-generated videos that emerged on YouTube around the same time. Further, they reflect the celebration of the ‘ordinary’ person promoted through YouTube and reality television programmes such as American Idol.[58]

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[56] Janet Lilo's YouTube collaborations are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.
[57] Tavola, 'Janet Lilo: Original Gangsta,' 1.

**Figure 1.13.** Janet Lilo*, Top 16* (profile photographs, picnic tables, brick drawings, video, cardboard screens), 2007, St Paul Street Gallery. Installation view showing Jigga Jo Thug videos.

The popularity of amateur user-generated video content online, via video sharing platforms such as YouTube, is reflected in the selection of moving image works in *Top 16.* In the first iteration of the installation, Lilo included several experimental music videos. In the experimental hip-hop music video *Kinetic Energy* by underground hip-hop artist *Dj Kinetic,* Lilo captures the local translation of West Coast hip-hop culture to the region of West Auckland. The video opens with a group of men walking into Hadad’s, a popular local takeaway, where one rapper unzips his hooded sweatshirt to reveal a screen-printed t-shirt with the word ‘West’ emblazoned across the chest. The rappers also appropriate the ‘Westside’ hand gesture popularised in the 1980s by West Coast rappers, re-inscribing it with the meanings and landscape of West Auckland. Here the gesture operates on two levels – as a sign of affinity with the hip-hop artists and culture of the West Coast and as a distinct local identity. [59] Within the installation, these videos point to the growing influence of popular culture and the process of re-territorialisation and localisation of global music trends.

The local and global dynamic is heightened in the installation by the inclusion of ‘collaborative’ works made by Lilo on YouTube. These works focus on the vernacular video genre of cover performances which are shot direct to the camera in the same style as vlogs. These videos are created through browsing YouTube and editing videos together to create collaborative performances with cover artists. References to YouTube are sometimes literal, as in examples where she creates remix videos that appear as screen recordings where she layers two browsing windows over the top of each other. This can be seen in the iteration of *Top 16* shown in Rarotonga, where the YouTube interface was present (Figure 1.14). Other examples of remix videos feature much heavier editing by Lilo and often include montaging clips, sound editing, jump cuts and the addition of text. Lilo's remix videos create a new collective performance that could not happen in real time.[60]

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[58] *American Idol* first aired in 2002 and was localised in ‘New Zealand Idol,’ which aired in 2004.
[59] Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop*, 66.

**Figure 1.14.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, remix videos, monitors), 2010, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga. Installation view. Photograph by author.

### Constructing the extimate avatar through interaction

The video works within *Top 16* create a visualisation of the global networks of YouTube and social networking websites. It is within this local and global context that Lilo highlights the process of inserting yourself into this networked environment. Across several iterations of *Top 16,* Lilo has included A-frame wooden picnic tables as an interactive element of the installation. The picnic table is a symbol Lilo has used in her practice in installations such as *Right of Way,* 2013, as an emblem of community and public space. Within the gallery context, the picnic table draws a parallel between the gallery as a social space of gathering and public parks and outdoor areas.[61] Within the context of *Top 16,* Lilo draws on the community connotations of the picnic table as a site for gallery visitors to sit, talk and network with others. The tables are equipped with Sharpie marker pens for gallery visitors to draw and leave comments on the picnic table. This interactive component turns the common vandalism of graffiti on public furniture into a creative activity that references the social activity of leaving comments on profile pages. In essence, the gallery visitors who interacted with the picnic table were emulating this activity in the offline context of the gallery.

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[60] Weir, 'Jump Cut: Music Video Aesthetics,' 4.

[61] In the last iteration, this was reinterpreted as a bench that served as seating in the installation. The interactive component was re-cast as a white board brick wall on which visitors could write comments or draw pictures.

**Figure 1.15.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (picnic tables, markers), 2010, Feleti Barstow Library, 10th Pacific Arts Festival Pago Pago. Installation view.

**Figure 1.16.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, picnic tables, brick drawings, bricks, heart sculpture, video, monitors), 2008, Fresh Gallery Ōtara. Detail of picnic table.

These interactive components and the contributions of gallery-goers drew parallels between graffiti practices and social networking websites. As illustrated in Figure 1.16, audiences made various contributions to the picnic table that included drawings, signatures, names and graffiti. Evident in this image are several ‘tags,’ which are self-elected and stylised names or signatures, used as an identity for the graffiti artist, that are usually written in public as graffiti.[62] Tagging is a form of unsanctioned graffiti and the practice of spray painting or writing names and initials in public spaces, such as models of public transport, walls of buildings and signs.[63] While the practice of tagging is largely illegal, it is also a textual practice of asserting one’s identity, as Fuhrer notes:

> Graffiti are written by people who find the walls or subway trains the only confessional with which they can struggle with their evolving self. Indeed, graffiti are announcements of one’s identity, a kind of testimonial to one’s existence in a work of anonymity: ‘I write, therefore I am.’ Thus, every public graffito can be seen and or read as a fragment of someone’s identity

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[62] Ministry of Youth Development New Zealand. *Tagging and Graffiti : Attitudes and Experiences of Young New Zealanders: Summary of Findings*, 4.

[63] Carrington, ‘I Write, therefore I Am: Texts in the City,’ 410.

> or even as a miniature autobiography of a member of a society in the sense that the graffiti reveals a part of his/her society in all that he/she writes.[64]

The visible tags on Lilo's picnic table represent this practice of asserting one's identity and presence and literally writing oneself into the work. Tags are a form of textual extimate avatars that may represent an individual's network of associations, including to other taggers or perhaps to members of an established graffiti crew.

This textual practice of tagging, which in itself functions as an avatar, parallels the creation of profile page avatars in social networking websites. As boyd notes, on social networking websites, individuals must write themselves into being.[65] According to boyd, profile pages on social networking websites allow individuals to type themselves and their communities into being. As a form of textual practice, the construction of profile pages, and specifically the areas for open-ended text, contribute to the construction of an ongoing narrative of an individual. The commenting facility on social networking websites opens this narrative to the contributions from other individuals' networks, allowing them to leave comments which are typically displayed as part of the profile page. This collaborative and intersubjective textual practice is emulated in *Top 26*, as gallery-goers 'write themselves' into the collective narrative of Lilo's installation.

Lilo's installation and its cross-references to multiple spaces and practices extended the visibility of social networking platforms. By adopting the template of the profile page gallery, users were able to engage in socially driven viewing practices. As suggested in the previous section, profile pages were a vehicle for individuals to write themselves into being. However, as Jenny Sundén argues, people must first learn how to write themselves into being.[66] This involves understanding the cultural norms and conventions for forms of self-construction and presentation, which are intimately tied to viewing and browsing. By viewing and browsing through profile pages on social networking websites, users get a sense of what types of information and imagery are appropriate expressions of identity.[67] Consequently, the act of looking informs and communicates a shared aesthetic. The process of looking and learning is evident in the photographic component of *Top 16,* which has grown with every iteration of the work. In the second iteration of the work in 2008 at Fresh Gallery, Otara, Lilo presented over 200 profile photographs directly taken from Bebo. Over the course of the installation, she has amassed an archive of over 3000 profile photographs. The profile photographs are largely self-portraits that have been copied directly from profile pages or dedicated profile photograph albums.[68] For each installation, the collection of profile photographs is printed in standard 6x4 format and stacked to create a large-scale montage. The photographic montage has featured in every iteration of the work and has become a central focus of the installation, which reflects a much broader visual turn of social media.[69]

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[64] Fuhrer, *Cultivating Minds*, 130.

[65] boyd, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,' 1-2.

[66] Jenny Sunedin quoted in boyd and Ellison, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,' 211.

[67] boyd, 'Why Youth Heart Social Network Sites: The role of networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 123.

[68] Janet Lilo, email to author, 27 January 2011.

**Figure 1.17.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, remix videos, monitors), 2010, BCA Gallery, Rarotonga. Installation view. Photograph by author.

Lilo's archive of profile photographs represents vernacular photography practices on social media – what Lilo describes as 'informal amateur photography.' Vernacular photography, whilst commonly associated with 'amateurs,' is a term that encompasses a range of photographic modes. Art historian Geoffrey Batchen emphasises the etymology of the term 'vernacular' to mean 'indigenous and 'ordinary;' thus, it can be applied to any photograph. However, he also acknowledges that it has been used commonly to refer to 'photographs not considered to be artistic in intention or function.'[70] By this definition, vernacular photography is made by a range of non-artists for a vast range of purposes which could be commercial, scientific, forensic or personal. Lilo's collection of profile photographs, which are highly personal and used specifically for display on social networking websites, aligns with a type of vernacular practice that Sarvas and Frohlich (2011) describe as 'domestic photography,' which relates to the activities of 'ordinary people' creating and using photographs for non-professional purposes.[71] Lilo's own observations about this practice reflect a new self-documentary practice as she comments,

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[69] Elements including the early Bebo material such as whiteboard drawings were not included in more recent iterations of the work, a reflection of their redundancy due to the closure of the website. Profile photographs appear on profile pages as the public portrait of the user. Profile photographs can be photographs of anything, however, as the style of profile pages are drawn from dating websites; portrait photographs are the most common choice of social networking users. boyd, 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 12.

[70] Batchen, 'Vernacular Photography.'

> It was like a portal into people's little worlds, infinite internet art galleries and I was amazed by how people portrayed themselves publicly on the internet for others to see [...] Images range from sexual and strange to mundane. Everything is online, family BBQs, clubbing, nana, rest in peace photos, pets, full face bandanas, the mirror, […]ummm […] art exhibitions, hot boys and girls, travelling, whatever, anything really.[72]

Lilo's observation of the broad range of photographs on social networking websites reflects the importance of sharing photographs as a way to document and communicate the way individuals look, places they have visited and events that have taken place. Viewing these photographs has an influence on shaping the trope of the extimate avatar of profile photographs and self-portrait photographs or 'selfies.'

### 1.7 Constructing extimate avatars through 'selfies'

As an archive, Lilo's collection of profile photographs document the emergence and popularity of the 'selfie' as a photographic genre and social practice. Its widespread popularity was reflected in 2013 when the Oxford Dictionary Online announced 'selfie' as the Word of the Year.[73] The Oxford Dictionary defines the 'selfie' as 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, esp. one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.'[74] The term itself originated as the hashtag '#selfie' on the photo-sharing website Flickr in 2004 and, according to Oxford, was not in widespread use until 2012 when it began to appear in mainstream media.[75] While 'selfies' are associated with forms of self-portraiture, it is a loose term that is also used to refer to photographs taken by others, such as the 'plandid' selfies that emerged in 2017.[76] The emergence of 'selfies' as a rapid mode and practice of self-documentation and self-portraiture was driven by advances in technologies, specifically mobile phones and digital cameras. The introduction of internet-capable smart phones also created opportunities for individuals to share their 'selfies' remotely and efficiently in real time.[77] Other technologies that drove the practice of 'selfies' included double-lensed camera devices and later the reversible mode of cameras that enabled the lens of the camera to be directed towards the user. Buse argues that this particular advance allowed for 'self-fashioning' and editing of 'selfies,' as the screen operated as a mirror that allowed users to review the 'pose', expression and focus of the image. Further ‘selfie’-specific technological advancements such as application filters allowed users to manipulate their images and engage in a far more sophisticated form of self-fashioning.[78]

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[71] Sarvas, *From Snapshots to Social Media - the Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*, 5-6.
[72] Lilo, 'Janet Lilo, Pecha Kucha Night Manukau Edition.'
[73] New Yorker, 'And the Word of the Year is…'
[74] OED Online, 'selfie, n.'
[75] BBC News, '"Selfie" Named by Oxford Dictionaries as Word of 2013.'
[76] 'Plandid' is a portmanteau of planned and 'candid,' and is a term used to describe planned and staged photographs of an individual. Stylistically, the subject of the photograph does not acknowledge the camera and is engaged in another activity. It is highly stylised and draws on the conventions of advertising and fashion. Diamond, 'Everyone is Copying these Celebrity Instagram Poses Now.'
[77] Sarvas, *From Snapshots to Social Media - the Changing Picture of Domestic Photography,*112.

Cruz and Thornham argue that ‘selfies’ are not mere representations; rather, they should be considered a performative and mediatory practice that ‘cannot be reduced to, or solely taken from the image ‘itself. ‘Selfies’ then can be located within the wider practice of identity performance, as a form of performativity employed by individuals to generate avatars that constitute their bodies. The performativity of ‘selfies’ draws on Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity as a discursive practice that ‘enacts or produces that which it names.’[79] Whilst often dismissed as narcissistic practice, ‘selfies’ are embedded forms of performativity, as Cruz and Thornham describe:

> Selfie generation is self-perpetuating: it is a ‘stylised repetition of acts’ that is a ‘re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established’ that are legitimated through their mundaneness and ritualization. Selfies are part of what ‘disciplines its subjects even as it produces them,’ or more simplistically, ‘people act in the way that they have learned to act in accord with the dominant discourse.’ [80]

Selfies thus are part of a wider cultural phenomenon used in myriad ways to technically and culturally constitute and communicate specific bodies.

**Figure 1.18.** Janet Lilo, *Top 16* (profile photographs, neon sculpture, whiteboard, whiteboard markers, YouTube remix videos, benches, neon light), 2018, Toi Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Installation view.

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[78] Lavrence and Cambre, ‘Do I Look Like My Selfie?: Filters and the Digital-Forensic Gaze,’ 1-2.
[79] Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, 13.
[80] Cruz and Thornham, ‘Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(R)Ictions of a Practice.’

Through the collation of thousands of ‘selfies’ into a physical photo montage, Lilo documents ‘selfies’ as a social practice that occurs across many different photographic modes. In the final iteration of the installation in 2018 at The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, the photographic montage was a wallpaper that covered a wall 5.1m high and 4.6m long. The montage, which drew directly from Lilo’s collected archive, reflected a decade of ‘selfie’ practice and highlighted loose sub-genres of the ‘selfies.’ [81] Amongst the sub-genres are technical approaches to ‘selfies’ with the use of different angles such as low, high, mid-shots and extreme close-ups. Others are site-specific, taken at a variety of venues including church, gym, cars and in private spaces such as bedrooms and bathrooms. Another popular technical sub-genre of the ‘selfie’ is taken at ‘arms-length,’ to appear as if another individual had taken the photograph. This sub-genre of ‘selfie’ and the ‘arms-length’ group portraits are new forms of portraiture that emerged through developments in camera technology such as the viewfinder on camcorders and double-lensed mobile devices.[82] Related to this subgenre of photographs is a series of self-portraits described by Lilo as ‘the self-portraits with digital camera.’[83] These selfies are taken in front of a mirror, capturing the act of self-portraiture and, in doing so, include the technology itself, albeit a digital camera and increasingly mobile phones.

Other sub-genres of ‘selfies’ were more performative in nature in constituting gendered bodies. In these instances, individuals created personas that reflected stereotypical constructions of femininity and masculinity. This included the trope of the ‘sexy bunny’ adopted by women, many of whom dressed in lingerie and wore bunny ears – the iconic logo of the adult magazine Playboy. Other feminine tropes, such as the ‘doe-eyed cutesy,’ communicated through exaggerated angles and at times with teddy bears and other loaded symbols. Conversely, the male trope of the ‘athletic jock’ was evoked by men taking selfies in the gym around exercise equipment or posing in bodybuilding stances. These few examples demonstrate the use of ‘selfie’ as the site and mode of identity performance. As Erika Pearson notes:

> Internet-based performances are mediated and codified – they exist as pixels on a screen. These performances within the imagination of users who then use tools and technologies to project, renegotiate, and continually revise their consensual social hallucination. Users manipulate these communicative codes, with varying degrees of skill and dexterity, to create not only online selves, but also to create the staging and setting in which these selves exist. As these SNS become more sophisticated (and as users are more acclimatized) these codified exchanges have evolved from scrolling words on a screen to avatars moving like puppets through constructed environments.[84]

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[81] King, ‘My Face.’
[82] Buse,’Vernacular Photograph Genres After the Camera Phone,’ 147.
[83] Giuseppe,’Virtual Reality as a Communication Environment: Consensual Hallucination, Fiction and Possible Selves,’ 672. [not in bibl]
[84] Pearson, ‘All the World Wide Web’s a Stage: The Performance of Identity in Online Social Networks.’

As evidenced across the many sub-genres of the photographic montage is the practice of opening up private space as the setting for 'selfies.' Scanning across Lilo's montage is a number of selfies that are staged in private domestic spaces, including bathrooms, bedrooms, living room spaces and private cars. These 'selfies' reflect a shifting notion of private and public, where the performance of identity in the form of public 'selfies' emerge from an intimate and private space. These 'selfies' reflect a shifting notion of private and public in selfies but also in social networking websites as the site display.

In analysing this phenomenon in this component of Lilo's installation, it is useful to return to the dramaturgical framework of sociologist Erving Goffman that frames all human interaction as performance. Goffman distinguishes the performances that occur in front of a particular set of observers (as in a social network) as the 'front,' the front stage that is visible to observers. The performances that take place in the 'front stage' are socially defined and prescriptive, in that they provide appropriate site-specific scripts that detail how one performs. Thus any 'front stage' performance such as the production of 'selfies' for social networking websites, which are the idealised 'impressions' of the self, have been carefully constructed and prepared in the 'backstage.' According to Goffman, the 'back region' or 'backstage' is relative to a performance but is invisible to the audience and is the private area where individuals can prepare.[85] In relation to selfies, the notion of the backstage is essential, as it allows for the 'private work necessary to create a public persona'.[86]

Despite the common presence of private spaces in Lilo's installation it is perhaps too simplistic to suggest that this reflects a new 'front space' that subsumes the backstage, allowing everything to be visible. This would dismiss the agency of the individual who negotiates the distinctions between what is front stage and backstage, thus visible and invisible, public and private, and online and offline. As Jurgensen and Pey note, the front and backstage are distinct and co-dependent spaces: the 'self' resides in performance and that performance requires both front and backstage.[87] Further, they emphasise the dialectical link between the front and backstage, as noted by Goffman:

> Underlying all social interaction there seems to be a fundamental dialectic. When one individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation. Were he to possess this information, he could know, and make allowances for, what will come to happen and he could give the others present as much of their due as is consistent with his enlightened self-interest. To uncover fully the factual nature of this situation, it would be necessary for the individual to know all the relevant social data about the others. It would also be necessary for the individual to know the actual outcome or endproduct of the activity of the others during the interaction, as well as their innermost feelings concerning him. Full information of this order is rarely available; in its absence, the individual tends to employ

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[85] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* 112-113

[86] Jurgensen and Rey, 'The Fan Dance: How Privacy Thrives in the Age of Hyper-Publicity,' 65.

[87] Jurgensen and Rey, 66.

> substitutes – cues, tests, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc. – as predictive devices. In short, since the reality that the individual is concerned with is unperceivable at the moment, appearances must be relied upon in its stead. And, paradoxically, the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances.[88]

**Figure 1.19.** Janet Lilo, *My Face* (profile photographs), 2009, Fresh Gallery Ōtara. Installation view.

This dialectical relationship between the visible and invisible, front and backstage, that is inherent to the components of *Top 16* is evoked as the framework for viewing the installation. By presenting profile photographs in a tiled pattern, Lilo evokes the format of the 'friends' list on the social networking website.[89] In doing so, she provides the architectural structure for viewing that highlights the communicative nature of the profile photographs as constituting real bodies that exist within a complex network that spans online and offline spaces. Viewing profile photographs, particularly those in Lilo's installation, evokes the social networking practice of visually finding connections. This process of identification and association requires an individual to be guided by their own existent networks as the index for their viewing. As can be seen in the installation image of 'selfie' photographs in Figure 1.19, the process of looking engages viewers' networks in a constant loop between their private, public and offline and online experiences.

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[88] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* 249.
[89] boyd, 'Why Youth Heart Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life,' 124.

### 1.8 Extimate avatars as technology of embodiment

The performative dimension of ‘selfies’ and profile pages expand the trope of the extimate avatar as practices of self-portraiture. Art historian Amelia Jones locates a similar shift in self-portraiture in contemporary art as an ‘exaggerated mode of self-imaging,’ which was established through the postmodern photographic practices of Yayoi Kusama and contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke and Laura Aguilar. According to Jones, the structure of exaggerated self-performance points to the profound duality of photographic representations of the body; as she notes:

> In these works, the subject performs herself or himself within the purview of an apparatus of perspectival looking that freezes the body as representation and so – as absence, as always already dead – in an intimate relation to lack and loss… At the same time, in their exaggerated theatricality, these works foreground the fact that the self-portrait photograph is eminently performative and so life giving.[90]

For Jones, artists exaggerating their own performance of themselves pivots around the mobilisation of technologies of representation: ‘by performing the self through photographic means artists ... play out the instabilities of human existence and identity in a highly technological and rapidly changing environment.’[91] As a result of this process, Jones offers another definition of the self-portrait photograph as a kind of ‘technology of embodiment.’ This definition of the self-portrait describes the changing relationship between humans and technologies that are increasingly intimate and entangled.

The concept of the ‘technology of embodiment’ describes an extimate relationship between humans and technologies. Post-human theorist Katherine Hayles, in her book *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics,* proposes that the conjunction of the body and the represented body through technology transforms the subject into the cyborg; as she states:

> The construction necessarily makes the subject into a cyborg, for the enacted and represented bodies are brought into conjunction through the technology that connects them …the overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject.[92]

The concept of technologies being entwined suggests that technologies are not simply extensions of the body but are incorporated with the human subject. Borrowing from Jacques Lacan, Hub Zwart suggests that these technologies are ‘extimate’ as they can be both intimate and external, embedded and foreign, life-enhancing in terms of prosthetics and intrusive.[93] As evidenced in the work of Lilo and others, extimate technology, as Jones asserts, not only ‘mediates subjectivities but is able to produce them.’[94]

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[90] Jones, ‘The “Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,' 949.

[91] Jones, 949.

[92] Hayles, *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, xii.

### 1.9 Technology of embodiment in *Life in AdWords,* 2012, Erica Scourti

Jones’ concept of a technology of embodiment and the relationship with ‘extimate’ technologies can be seen in artistic self-representation that emerged in response to and within the networked environment of social media. Emblematic of this type of artistic enquiry are the performative actions and audio-visual works of London-based artist Erica Scourti that address the notion of self-mediation. Her long-term internet-based networked art project, *Life in AdWords* (2012-2013) enacts the intimate entanglement with technology proposed by both Hayles and Jones. Spanning almost a year, *Life in AdWords* began with Scourti writing a daily diary and emailing this to herself on Gmail. She would then perform a reading of the Google advertisement and keywords known as ‘AdWords’ suggested by Gmail as a daily webcam video capture. The performances reveal a disjointed list of words, as can be seen in a quote from the first two excerpts of the October video:

> Funny Jokes
>
> Photo images
>
> Free photo shop
>
> Jpeg photo
>
> Emotions
>
> Sorting
>
> Guilty Feelings
>
> Sleeping bag
>
> Cold weather clothing
>
> Crack up
>
> Live TV on the Internet
>
> Live Streaming TV[95]

The seemingly disjointed list of words are the headlines of suggested ads that appear in connection with the content of her emails. The daily webcam videos are short vlog-style videos and feature

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[93] Zwar, ‘Extimate Technologies and Techno-Cultural Discontent: A Lacanian Discontent: A Lacanian Analysis of Pervasive Gadgets,’ 24.

[94] Jones, ‘The “Eternal Return”: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,’ 949

[95] Quoted from the narration, Scourti, ‘Life in AdWords: October 2012.’

Scourti in a range of settings, including bedrooms, studio spaces, living rooms, computer labs and office lab spaces. Despite the changing scene and Scourti's own state of dress, which includes being in pyjamas and lying in bed, she reads the list at the same steady pace, with monotone voice and blank expression. In total, Scourti created over 300 vlogs and only stopped due to a system change in Gmail ad settings.[96]

**Figure 1.20.** Erica Scourti, *Life in AdWords* (Online video, colour sound, 6 minutes 11 seconds duration), October 2012. Screenshot by author.

The list of AdWords read in each performance materialise the digital codes of the Google-patented algorithm that scans her diary entries and selects keywords connected to products, companies and ideas. Google AdWords, now known simply as 'Google Ads', is an online marketing service that allows businesses and websites to improve their visibility. These revolve around the Google algorithm and keywords that improve visibility to search engines (Search Engine Optimisation) or pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, which allows businesses and website owners to bid on the opportunity to show ads next to searches on Google.[97] Different businesses and websites utilise this form of online marketing to target specific customers based on interests and lifestyles. To facilitate targeted marketing, online behaviour is tracked and sent to traffic-logging sites, companies and other ad-firms, allowing them to place ads tailored to your personal interest. In reading the AdWords generated via her email, Scourti points to the extent of monitoring that produces personalised ads, and the way personal information is the new product of the 'free internet economy.' Her emails become the basis of a changing consumer profile, as she states:

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[96] Garett, 'A Life in AdWords, Algorithms & Data Exhaust. An Interview with Erica Scourti.'
[97] Google, 'Google Ads: SEO vs. PPC?'

> Simply put, I wanted to make visible in a literal and banal way how algorithms are being deployed by Google to translate our personal information – in this case, the private correspondence of email content – into consumer profiles, which advertisers pay to access.[98]

Her diary-like webcams relate to the practice of web-camming and life-casting that emerged in conjunction with the introduction of webcam technologies in the 1990s. Life-casting takes various modes but generally describes the practice of sharing every moment of life online and in real-time.[99] Scourti's choice of webcam recalls the sense of realism associated with webcams, which are generally characterised in terms of openness, liveness, disclosure and freedom of expression.[100] Across the work, viewers are privy to her private spaces, including her studio and her bed. This insight into private space is inherent to webcam culture, which is associated with a sense of documentary authenticity and liveness that affords a view into what someone is actually doing.[101] As windows into 'real life' webcams introduced a new mediated intimacy or extimacy, it enabled corporeal experiences of networked space.[102] The sense of authenticity purported to create an 'accurate' self-presentation by the webcam is undermined in Scourti's performances by the awkward mechanical language of the algorithm.

Scourti's use of webcams also evokes a mediated intimacy that can be related to Lacan's notion of extimacy. As a mode of documentary, webcams aim to bridge the social, technological and geographical distance between users by creating intimacy with viewers. Intimacy was emphasised through the trope of the confession as a form of autobiography and a mediated articulation of the self.[103] Formally, the composition of the webcam confessional also assisted in creating a sense of extimacy with the public through its typical second-person-singular perspective. The confessional culture prompted a renegotiation of the private and public, hidden and visible.[104] The confessional trope encouraged individuals to exteriorise their interiority as a form of 'public interiority.'[105] This form of extimacy is inherent in Scourti's self-presentation that reflects the social and mediated construction of publicly made intimacy.[106]

The multiple layers of *Life of AdWords* create a complex self-portrait comprising Scourti's diaristic webcams and the interpretation of her body via AdWord algorithms. In essence, the list of ads are created from the keywords that represent the online activity of others.[107] The polyvocal and notional self-portrait in *Life of AdWords* points to what she describes as the solipsistic feedback loop that curates Google searches and news feeds on social networking websites to mirror the interests of an individual. Scourti describes her performances as a play on the solipsistic loop:

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[98] Garett, 'A Life in AdWords, Algorithms & Data Exhaust. An Interview with Erica Scourti.'

[99] Lifecasting emerged with American College Student Jennifer Ringley whose 'Jennicam' livecast is often credited as the first lifecast. Jennicam ran twenty-four hours a day and offered an unfiltered view into intimate details of her life including using the bathroom, having sex and masturbating. Jennicam became a pay for service site and ran from 1996-2003.

[100] Dixon*, Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation,* 444.

[101] Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM the Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, 74-75.

[102] Dixon*, Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, 445.

[103] Media including webcams have shifted the meaning of 'confession' from religious, moral and juridical confessions to the disclosure of intimate secrets, desires of hidden aspects of "inner life".' Burkart, 'When Privacy Goes Public: New Media and the Transformation of the Culture of Confession,' 26.

[104] Burkart, 26.

[105] Mateus, 'Public Intimacy,' 66.

[106] Burkart, 'When Privacy Goes Public: New Media and the Transformation of the Culture of Confession,' 24-25.

[107] Gronlund, 'From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art After the Internet,' 9-10.

> Life in AdWords plays on this solipsism, since it's based on me talking to myself (writing a diary), then emailing it to myself and then repeating to the mirror-like webcam a Gmail version of me. This mirror-fascination also implies a highly narcissistic aspect, which echoes the preoccupation with self-performance that the social media stage seems to engender.[108]

Scourti's performance highlights the ways in which subjectivity (in her emails) is drawn into commodification in this loop. For Scourti, this foregrounds accusations of women's self-presentations as being narcissistic, specifically those that reflect what capital expects and demands.[109]

**Figure 1.21.** Erica Scourti, *Body Scan* (Video, sound, colour, monitor, 5 minutes and 3 seconds duration), 2014, HeK Basel. Installation view.

Scourti's self-performances create an evolving dialogue with technologies that illustrates another form of extimacy that she describes as the 'self and software.'[110] This entanglement between the body and technologies is the basis of another autobiographic self-portrait video work entitled *Body Scan,* 2014. To create this work, Scourti took photographs of her body and her partner's body using an iPhone, and submitted them to image-recognition search engine application software, CamFind, that identifies images and links visual images to online information.[111] The video work is comprised of iPhone screenshots stitched together using a video editor, documenting the process of uploading images to CamFind and the varied results they returned, which includes advertisements of products, image results, colours and Wikipedia pages. The rapid pace of screenshots is narrated by a voice-over of Scourti attempting to read the links and keep pace with the screenshots. As determined by mobile technology, the video is in portrait orientation, and the final work is displayed on a screen turned to portrait orientation like an oversized mobile phone screen (Figure 1.21).

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[108] Garett, 'A Life in AdWords, Algorithms & Data Exhaust. An Interview with Erica Scourti.'
[109] Gram, 'The Young-Girl and the Selfie'
[110] Garett, 'A Life in AdWords, Algorithms & Data Exhaust. An Interview with Erica Scourti.'

The title of the work alludes to the mediation practice of body scanning, which brings focus to the body through a mental scan from head to toe. Taking this as a loose framework, *Body Scan* brings into focus an extimate relationship between physical bodies in constant connection and dialogue with technologies. The photographs and the subsequent results from the CamFind application are structured chronologically and form a diary that spans several months.[112] The opening narration begins in a meditative style, accompanied by soft images of rose colours of dawn, describing a moment between lovers:

> Lying comfortably in your bed, while you were still asleep. Feel your body as if for the first time. Gently place your attention on your foot. A human foot. An anatomical structure found in many vertebrates. But often cranky, sore, and overworked. [113]

The following image is of a photograph of a foot uploaded to the CamFind application, followed by search results for feet. Despite the jarring juxtapositions created between narration, image and text-based search results, Scourti visualises the complex networks that enmesh the body.

Overwhelmingly, the fragmented images of the body are interpreted within a commercial framework making visible the ways in which the algorithm generated values. Whilst the work includes photographs of a male body, the emphasis of the work is largely the interpretation and commodification of the female body. In documenting the process through screenshots, Scourti highlights the ways in which the female body is made to be readable and classified in ways that reflect market values.[114] The readability of the body also symbolises its ‘disconnection’ and ability to be networked, as described by artist Hito Steyrl:

> And on top of this, your face is getting disconnected—not only from your butt, but also from your voice and body. Your face is now an element—a face/mixed with phone, ready to be combined with any other item in the library. Captions are added, or textures, if needs be. Face prints are taken. An image becomes less of a representation than a proxy, a mercenary of

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[111] CamFind was an application launched in 2013.

[112] Astle and Scourti, *Transmediale 2015: Erica Scourti, Banks of Body Parts and Body Scan*.

[113] Narration quoted from the artwork *Body Scan*, 2014, access provided by the artist.

[114] Astle and Scourti, *Trasmediale 2015: Erica Scourti, Banks of Body Parts and Body Scan*.

> appearance, a floating texture-surface-commodity. Persons are montaged, dubbed, assembled, and incorporated.[115]

In *Body Scan*, Scourti highlights how the physical body is readable and generates commercial values. For example, in the photographs that focus on her breasts and bottom, the CamFind application returns search results that focus on enhancing and modifying them, as echoed in the narration, 'Woman. Woman Breasts, Fast Enlargement, Natural implants.' For Scourti, the proliferation of these kinds of images reveals the ways in which 'body insecurities generate commercial value in the form of products and services.'[116]

The search results in *Body Scan* also reveal the assumptions and limitations of the algorithm and its circulation of cultural codes maintained by the market it serves.[117] As a whole, the search results reflect gender categorisations and commodities based on the male and female binary. It also shows how Scourti's body is confined within an algorithmically driven normativity, which frames the body within cultural codes and cliché representations that objectify female bodies online. This can be seen in the naked images of Scourti that are uploaded into the CamFind application. In one screenshot, Scourti uploads a mid-shot selfie revealing her breasts, which is identified by the application as 'Woman Breasts' and returns a number of search results as discussed above. However, in the previous sequence, Scourti uploads a similar 'selfie' that shows her mid-torso, revealing both her breasts and pubic area. This photograph is classified as 'offensive' and returns no results. These two screenshots highlight the cultural norms that the algorithm works within and perpetuates.

In addition to visualising the algorithm, *Body Scan* also documents a mediated intimacy between the two bodies photographed in the work. It offers what Scourti describes as a snapshot of a 'mediated intimacy' and loose autobiographical documentation of her love life. The intimate and close-up photographs, some of which are labelled 'offensive,' create an exchange between bodies that draws on the vocabulary of 'sexting,' the practice of sending or receiving sexual pictures, messages or videos through mobile, video and online technologies. It also references other modes of technology that are used to facilitate romantic connections, such as Skype sex and flirtations on message-based services such as Whatsapp and G-chat. By utilising the vocabulary of these practices, Scourti highlights the intersubjective and embodied nature of mediated intimacy. Dixon, in writing about webcam sex practices, quotes Catherine Waldby, who argues:

> This space comes about through particular conjunctions of the body and digital technology, which in turn enables new forms of intersubjective space. To engage in eroticised exchange at the screen interface is to suture the body's capacities for pleasure into the interactive space

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[115] Steyerl, 'Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise.'
[116] Astle and Scourti, *Transmediale 2015: Erica Scourti, Banks of Body Parts and Body Scan*.'
[117] Astle and Scourti.

> of the network, to use that network as the medium for pleasuring and being pleasured at a distance.[118]

This notion of a mediated intimacy or extimacy that utilises the network is echoed in the voice-over narration. This fluctuates between mechanical listings of facts and more affectionate phrases, for example, ‘Shipping both ways, Save today for future reference, Just be patient, but baby I can’t wait, forever 21, 402 Hamburg Road.’[119] This reflects a deliberate intertwining; as Scourti notes, ‘I wanted to suggest a subjective experience of physical intimacy being entangled with this outside-apparently objective information.’[120] This dialogue reflects Jones’ concept of a technology of embodiment, which is echoed by fellow artist Hito Steyrl in a revised definition of the cyborg figure:

> Humans and things intermingle in ever-newer constellations to become bots or cyborgs. As humans feed affect, thought, and sociality into algorithms, algorithms feed back into what used to be called subjectivity.[121]

**Figure 1.22.** Erica Scourti, *Body Scan* (Video, sound, colour, 5 minutes and 5 seconds duration), 2014. Sequential screenshots by author showing uploaded photograph and first search result.

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[118] Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, 445.
[119] Narration quoted from *Body Scan* (2014), access provided by the artist.
[120] Astle, *Transmediale 2015: Erica Scourti, Banks of Body Parts and Body Scan*.
[121] Steyerl, ‘Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise.’

**Figure 1.22.** Erica Scourti, *Body Scan* (Video, sound, colour, 5 minutes and 5 seconds duration), 2014. Sequential screenshots by author showing uploaded photograph and first search result.

As a form of self-portraiture and autobiography, Scourti's video works articulate the extimate relationship with technologies that facilitate mediated intimacies and embodied gestures. While they pivot around her own self-performance, they embrace the collective in nature, informed by the collectively monitored behaviour and subsequent algorithms of thousands of people online.[122] Her works speak to an intimate relationship with technologies and specific algorithms that inform and shape subjectivity. This human-technological relationship aligns with post-human feminist Donna Haraway, as she suggests:

> Or maybe the algorithm and social media soul is now so intertwined and interdependent that it makes little sense to even separate the two, in an unlikely fulfilment of Donna Haraway's cyborg? Instead of having machines built into/onto us (Google glasses not withstanding), the algorithms which parse our email content, Facebook behaviours, Amazon spending habits, and so on, don't just read us, but shape us.[123]

### 1.10 Performative self-portraits and Lacan's screen

This dialectical link between bodies and technologies in the self-portrait works discussed in this chapter signal a shift away from creating an autonomous, coherent subject. Instead, these works reflect the impact of technologies on the work of artists who creatively explore their networked bodies.

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[122] Scourti, 'You Could've Said…Live 24th July 2013.'
[123] Rourke, 'Artist Profile: Erica Scourti.'

Melissa Gronlund, in relation to identity and narcissism in video works in the age of the internet, suggests:

> […] the emphasis on picturing a relationship with an 'other' in more recent work suggests a focus on the gap between one's notion of one's own identity and its representation out there in the world; this involves a movement away from fusion, towards a split subject and object, and towards a character for whom the look of others is constitutive of him- or herself.[124]

The recognition of the look of others as being constitutive of the self acknowledges what Gronlund describes as the 'public horizon' of identity framed in the artistic practices that connect with the internet.[125] As is demonstrated in the work of Scourti and Lilo, identity is performative and intimately entwined with online sociality and ways of looking and creating external visibility.[126]

The notion of identity as being constituted through the look of others, particularly in relation to the public horizon of social media, evokes Lacan's notion of the 'gaze.' In his book *Four Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan adopts phenomenologist Marcel Merleau Ponty's phenomenological model of reversible vision that identifies the body as subject and object, the seeing and seen.[127] Lacan adopts this notion but shifts the emphasis to prioritise the possibility of being seen as an internalised gaze, what he describes as the 'pre-existence to the seen or a given-to-be-seen.'[128] For Lacan, an individual's subjectivity is determined through a gaze from 'outside' and is the experience of being seen as an object, as he states:

> The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing…this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows.[129]

The consciousness of the gaze causes the subject to identify with what Lacan refers to as 'object a,' the most intimate desires that are extimate and external. The relationship between the eye and the gaze is illustrated in three diagrams. The first triangle represents the eye of the subject, the second diagram the gaze. In the first diagram (Figure 1.23), the subject is standing at the geometral point of vision, and the left line is the object that he/she looks at. The image of the object is represented by the middle line. In the second diagram (Figure 1.24), the gaze of others is situated at the point of light and on the right through the screen is the picture of the subject. This process, Lacan states, 'turns me into a picture.'[130] For Lacan, these two systems are not independent rather they are superimposed, as in the last diagram, to indicate that they occur simultaneously. Lacan explains this:

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[124] Gronlund, 'From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet,' 6.

[125] Gronlund also connects this with the much larger shift in framing identity in the video work of artists in the 1970s, specifically Rosalind Krauss. Krauss' writing of the medium of video is explored in Chapter Two.

[126] Gronlund, 'From Narcissism to the Dialogic: Identity in Art after the Internet.' 9.

[127] Merleau-Ponty argues that the body can be experienced either as subject or object but cannot do both simultaneously, 'for I can palpate my right hand with my left while my right hand is touching an object. The right hand, as an object, is not the right hand that does the touching. The first is an intersecting of bones, muscles, and flesh compressed into a point of space; the second shoots across space to reveal the external object in its place. Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can neither be seen nor touched. What prevents it from ever being an object or from ever being "completely constituted" is that my body is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible insofar as it is what sees and touches.' Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 94.

[128] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* 74.

[129] Lacan, 75.

> I must, to begin with, insist on the following: the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which – if you will allow me to use a word, as I often do, in a fragmented form – I am photo-graphed.[131]

**Figure 1.23.** Jacques Lacan, Diagram of the eye and the gaze.

**Figure 1.24.** Jacques Lacan, Diagram of the visual field.

In this latter diagram, the object is also at the point of the light, now called the gaze; the subject is also at the point of the picture now called the subject of representation and the image also in line with the screen. The screen in the diagram should be understood both as external to the subject and as the 'locus of mediation' where the human subject maps or graphs themselves in the gaze. Art historian Hal Foster points out that the screen is an obscure term and suggests it can stand in for the conventions of art and the codes of visual culture that mediate the object-gaze for the subject.[132] The screen can also materialise itself in the form of material screens such as televisions, mobile phones and computers and many other screen-objects where subjectivity is mediated by images appearing on screens. This function of the screens as surfaces as recognised by Joseph A. Amto, who states:

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[130] Lacan, 106.

[131] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 106.

> Surfaces to suggest a general kind of dialectic…They establish contexts, configurations, and juxtapositions of thing and flesh, nature and society, and they nurture life and awaken the mind. Humans forever and constantly move in and out of the world's surfaces, travelling between things and objects, the other and the self. Outsides point towards and come to identify insides.[133]

Lacan's gaze and the screen are useful in considering the work of photographic self-portraiture that explores the mediated nature of subjectivity. Amelia Jones draws on these theories in her exploration of self-portrait photographs and states:

> The screen defines the process through which we perform ourselves simultaneously as subjects and objects of looking; the photographic portrait can thus be viewed as a screen across and through which complex processes of identification and projection take place in an ongoing dynamic of subject formation or subjectification.[134]

Across several examples of female self-portraits, Jones identifies what she terms 'exaggerated examples of theatrical photographic self-production' that employ the self-portrait to foreground the 'I as other to itself.'[135] Further, she states that the photograph as screen displays corporeality-as-surface that acts as a 'skin that envelopes our corporeality that it indicates and presupposes interiority.'[136]

### 1.11 Photographic self-portraits as performative screens: *Supermodel,* 2011, Janet Lilo.

Jones' framework is useful in considering the photographic self-portrait works of Janet Lilo, which can be considered theatrical self-performances. In 2011, as part of a three-week residency at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia, Lilo presented her photographic self-portrait series *Top Model.* This series of 16 images is inspired by her reality television and American reality television programme *America's Next Top Model.* In this series, she explores her relationship to the reality television programme as a 'viewer, wise amateur and self-proclaimed critic.' [137] In this series, Lilo superimposes herself onto the faces of the winners of 16 'cycles' of America's Next Top Model. The images were created using self-portraits taken with Photo Booth software and webcam on a Mac laptop and superimposed onto existing photographs using Photoshop.[138] These modified self-portraits were then superimposed again onto photographs of billboards and bus shelters in Nouméa taken by Lilo.

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[132] Foster, 'Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,' 109.

[133] Amato, *Surfaces a History*, xiv.

[134] Jones, 'The "Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,' 950

[135] Jones, 950

[136] Jones, 967-968

[137] 'Rituels – Rituals,' accessed Feb 21, 2021,

[138] Gordon-Smith, 'Cut and Paste with Keyboard Shortcuts,' 36.

**Figure 1.25.** Janet Lilo, *Top Model,* 2011. Still.

**Figure 1.26.** Janet Lilo, *Top Model,* 2011. Still.

**Figure 1.27.** Janet Lilo, *Top Model,* 2011. Still.

These digital self-portraits emulate the construction of digitally enhanced body imagery, which is commonplace in mass media. By superimposing her own face within the existing photographs, Lilo creates a screen through which she is both the subject and object of the 'gaze.' Lacan's notion of the screen as a mask allows subjects to map themselves, as he argues the screen 'gives of himself, or receives from the other, something like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin…'[139] In these doubly superimposed self-portraits, Lilo reveals the ways in which a screen or mask becomes what Jones describes as the 'site of projection and identification.'[140] Inserting herself within the 'pose' of the models is a performative gesture to be seen and photographed in this way. Theorist Craig Owens describes this as making 'oneself seen' in the scopic field as the subject of desire where 'The subject poses as an object in order to be a subject.'[141]

In these self-portraits, Lilo highlights the objectification of women as fashion models in women's magazines and the fashion industry at large. By appropriating familiar campaigns, she constructs herself in the trope of a fashion model as a screen through which the gaze is normalised. Through modelling and fashion shows, models become 'aesthetic objects on display.' Fashion models thus internalise the gaze and are to be 'looked at,' as Sylvia M. Holla argues:

> The model's job is, in essence to be looked at. They enter and exit various situations in which they are objectified and objectify themselves: the castings, agency visits, on sets before

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[139] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* 107.
[140] Jones, 'The "Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,' 959.
[141] Owens, 'Posing,' 17.

> cameras, on runways at home in front of the mirror. They are, however, not objectified to the same degree in all situations, nor all the time.[142]

The 'looked-at' nature of fashion models in Lilo's work evokes film theorist Laura Mulvey's notion of the 'male gaze,' which draws on Freud's term 'scopophilia,' the pleasure of looking. Mulvey argues that there is pleasure derived from looking at people as objects and from the act of looking at images of other people.[143] The act of looking or the gaze is reflective of the realities of gender realities that objectify women as the image and men as the bearers of the gaze. This, she argues, is determined by the sexual imbalance in society at large that prescribes pleasure in looking between the 'active/male' and the 'passive/female.'[144] Although Lilo's photographs stem from fashion photography and cosmetic advertisements that are targeted to women, they are, by virtue of the camera gaze, still subject to the male gaze. Here the camera functions as the perspective of the viewer, enabling the possibility for identifications with the male gaze by the female object as performed by Lilo.

Here the female object is the trope of the cover girl, a beautiful woman who appears on the cover of magazines. By inserting herself within this established network of codified representations, Lilo reveals the ways in which such imagery is subject to the conventions and laws which produce them. In the world of fashion, the aesthetic conventions and the 'look' required of models are set by the industry at large, including agents, fashion designers and photographers. For models, maintaining the 'look' also requires monitoring and 'aesthetic labour' in the form of enhancements like plastic surgery and everyday well-being practices such as eating well and sleeping.[145] Lilo mimics this process by digitally enhancing her own self-image to fit within the established aesthetics and ideals of beauty embodied in these images. In several images, she inserts herself into advertisements for American company Cover Girl, becoming the quintessential 'cover girl'. She was aligning herself with the tradition of representation through marketing campaigns that have promoted heteronormative notions of beauty to a female audience.[146]

Lilo's framing of the self-portraits as commercial advertising also codes her appearance within the exhibitionist role of women as having a 'to-be-looked-atoness' quality. [147] This is emphasised by the second superimposition of her self-portraits within the public spaces of Nouméa in billboards and bus-stops. The repetition of her own image, which she refers to as ritual, engages with the gaze; she states:

> Here the ritual, through its act or its role, is confronted with the idea of the gaze focused on women – with a touch of obsession – on their external beauty, their perfection, and in an

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[142] Holla, 'Aesthetic Objects on Display: The Objectification of Fashion Models as a Situated Practice,' 251-268.

[143] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,' 836-837.

[144] Mulvey, 837.

[145] Holla, 'Aesthetic Objects on Display: The Objectification of Fashion Models as a Situated Practice,' 256.

[146] Until 2016 the Cover Girl models were female. In 2016 the brand announced American model James Charles as the first CoverBoy, which reflects efforts of the brand and the industry to be more inclusive and gender fluid.

[147] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,' 837.

> ironic way, at a time of my life, where I personally, as a woman, have felt the extreme physical changes in my body and the relationship.[148]

Lilo's recurring self-portrait as a self-described 'ritual' or 'act' under the male gaze illustrates Judith Butler's theories of performativity and citationality. According to Butler, 'performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalisation in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.' In Lilo's repetition and citation of the pose and 'look' of models, she reveals the constructed nature of beauty and perfection that shape norms of femininity and gender.

As addressed in this chapter, the growth of social media applications have helped to fashion the trope of the extimate avatar as a digitally networked body constituted by many changing components. The new practices of self-representation that emerged within the networked environments of social media have given rise to new modes of representation such as 'selfies' and profile pages. These forms, by virtue of existing in networked environments, helped to frame the extimate avatar as a digitally networked body. This is captured extensively in the installation *Top,* 16 by Janet Lilo in her appropriation and presentation of material taken directly from social networking websites over a ten-year period. By utilising the structure of the profile page, Lilo illustrated the ways in which these extimate avatar forms are providing new ways to conversate, connect and validate networks and write yourself into being. This extimate dialogue between people and technology is echoed in the work of Erica Scourti, whose works employ images of her own body in conversation with online application Google AdWords. Through performance and still images of her body and her body interpreted as algorithms, Scourti illustrates an entanglement with technology or a 'technology of embodiment' that demonstrates a new form of extimacy between the self and software. This technology of embodiment is extended to the notion of Lacan's screen in the work of Lilo, who enmeshes her self-portrait within the codified nature of fashion photography. Collectively these artists reflect the extimate relationship between people and technologies as mediums that enable the production and experience of identity through the extimate avatar. Their works reflect the ways in which social media and its associated applications have influenced new contemporary artists whose works reflect the trope of the extimate avatar as a digitally and technologically networked body.

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[148] Tjibaou, Agence de developpement de la culture kanak, 'Rituels – Rituals.'

# 2. Broadcast Yourself: Extimate avatars on YouTube

The introduction of YouTube in 2005 and its widespread popularity ushered in new forms of extimate self-representations and performativity through the medium of online video. Global participation on YouTube authored new genres of vernacular video such as vlogs (video logs) and bedroom musical performances that became popular vehicles for self-expression, public profiling and branding. The distribution of these forms of self-expression also manufactured new forms of fame and celebrity. The ability to 'broadcast yourself' to unknown publics reinforced the trope of the extimate avatar as an externally projected or broadcasted image. The ability to broadcast publicly within and beyond the participatory culture of YouTube evoked a new understanding of extimacy as a communicative desire to share ones 'inner world.' This notion of extimacy is explored in relation to the work of contemporary artists who created works in response to and in direct engagement with YouTube as a platform and archive. The artists in this chapter – Oliver Laric, Janet Lilo, Amie Siegel and Natalie Bookchin – are representative of a style of video that emerged concurrent with and in response to the growth of YouTube in the age of mobile internet. Collectively, these artists share a common methodology of appropriating content from YouTube to create new recombinant videos that reflect the aesthetic and dynamics of vernacular video, including remixing, mashups and remakes. To contextualise these works, this chapter will address the performative materiality of YouTube videos, including vlogs (video log), bedroom musical performances and chroma-keyed remix videos. Through close analysis of the works of Laric, Lilo, Siegel and Bookchin, it will argue that the concept of extimacy and the trope of the extimate avatar on YouTube has enabled the construction of codified and extimate experiences of identities. Unpacking these works will demonstrate the ways in which these artists offer insight into the dynamics of YouTube videos and employ notions of extimacy to redefine and reconfigure collective perception of the visible, the individual and collective and the private and public.

## 2.1 Television, video and counter (artistic) practices

Contemporary video artists engaging with YouTube as a site of artistic and cultural production continue a well-established tradition of artists' engagement with new media such as television in its various genres. In the field of contemporary art, the introduction of video as an artistic medium in the 1960s coincided with the video manufacturers' focus on the home market.[149] In 1965, Sony Corporation introduced the first affordable video recording system, Sony CV-2000, which included a video recorder and a video camera kit. The first truly portable video camera was released in 1967 – the Sony DV-2400 Video Rover (commonly referred to as portapaks) which was battery operated and included a shoulder pack that weighed 11 pounds.[150] The black-and-white portapak camera was quickly adopted by artists, including Vitto Aconci and Nam June Paik, who embraced the portability and immediacy of the new medium of video. Many of the earliest video works were technologically defined by video length, lending itself to documentation of performance, personal and autobiographical pieces and representations of time and memory.[151]

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[149] London, 'Independent Video: The First Fifteen Years.'

[150] Buckingham, Willet and Pini, 'Home Truths: Video Production and Domestic Life,' 9.

By 1970, video had received curatorial and critical recognition as an artistic medium through several exhibitions, following its first presentation as a medium in *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age,* 1968, at the Museum of Modern Art.[152] Critics and scholars attempted to define video art as a genre distinct from television. In 1978, as part of a review of two symposia related to video art and the aesthetics of television, Curtis L. Carter proposed a definition of video art in contrast to television as the work of individual artists pursuing artistic means of expression rather than commercial aims.[153] It had a prescribed audience, restricted to public displays in gallery exhibitions and museums or in private viewing. In contrast, he defined the realm of television as being used to inform and entertain the masses, following the broadcast model of commercial radio. [154] This definition of video art was also endorsed by art institutions and galleries. [155]

The definition of video art in contrast to television created two opposing ends of video production; however, in practice, artists were creating in much more fluid ways. Artist Martha Rosler, in her widely read 1984 essay 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment*',* offers a re-reading of the history of video art and criticises the containment of the medium into traditional genres, which she describes as 'museumization':

> Museumization must involve the truncation of both practice and discourse to the pattern most familiar and most palatable to those notoriously conservative museum boards and funders… Museumization has heightened the importance of installations that make video into sculpture, painting, or still life, because installations can only live only in museums- which display a modern high-tech expansiveness in their acceptance of mountains of obedient and glamourous hardware. Curatorial frameworks also like to differentiate genres, so that video has been forced into those old familiar forms; documentary, personal, travelogue, abstract-formal, image-processed – and now those horrors, dance and landscape (and music) video.[156]

According to Rosler, museumization led to the professionalization of the field and the establishment of a preference for stylistic production values. For Rosler, these production values obscured the critical significance of artists engaging with broadcast television. As she argues:

> In separating out something called video art from the other ways that people, including artists, are attempting to work with video technologies, they have tacitly accepted the idea that

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[151] Nadaner, 'Teaching Perception through Video Art,' 19-24.

[152] Barbara London identifies several exhibitions as key to this recognition: *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, 1968, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Lindsay Tape, *Television as a Creative Medium*, 1968, at Kinetic Art Gallery, New York; *Vision and Television* at the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts. London, 'Independent Video: The First Fifteen Years.'

[153] Carter, 'Aesthetics, Video Art and Television,' 289-293.

[154] Carter, 289-293

[155] Curtis notes the first sale of an artist video tape in 1969 by Nicholas Wilder.

[156] Rosler, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment,' 31.

> transformations of art are formal, cognitive and perceptual. At the very least, this promotes a mystified relation to the question of how the means of production are structured, organized, legitimated, and controlled for the domestic market and the international one as well.[157]

Rosler describes the work of video artists at the time as forming ‘counter practices,’ acts of criticism specifically directed at the domination of video by corporations and state-run organisations that embodied broadcast television. As Rosler states, ‘artists were responding not only to the positioning of the mass audience but also to the particular silencing or muting of artists as producers of living culture in the face of the vast mass-media industries: the culture industry versus the consciousness industry.’[158] These counter practices aimed to be more socially invested and ‘person-centred, originating with persons – rather than from industries’ and existing outside the institution of the gallery.[159] The definition of counter practice as non-institutional and people-centred resonates with the participatory culture of YouTube and the emergence of vernacular mediums such as *vlogs* (video logs), remix videos and mashups. The history of counter practice within video art provides a foundation for the work of contemporary artists in this chapter who align with and appropriate the aesthetics and dynamics of YouTube.

### 2.2 The medium of video is narcissism

Writing of the medium of video in the late 1970s, scholar Rosalind Krauss’ writings on the nature of video were almost prescient for the participatory video culture of YouTube. In her seminal essay, ‘Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,’ Krauss proposes that the ‘medium of video is narcissism.’[160] Her statement was illustrated by the video work *Centers,* 1971, by Vitto Acconci, where he films himself pointing at the centre of the television monitor for a duration of 22 minutes and 28 seconds. In commenting upon this work, Krauss describes a form of extimacy where Acconci is simultaneously the subject and object; as she states:

> When we look at *Centers* we see Acconci sighting along his arm to the center of the screen we are watching. But latent in the set-up is the monitor that he is, himself looking at. There is no way for us to see *Centers* without reading that sustained connection between the artist and his double. So for us, as for Acconci, video is a process which allows these two terms to fuse.[161]

For Krauss, the concept of fusion is associated with the mirror-reflection, which is a critical theory of Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. For Lacan, the mirror-stage is a formative stage in child development that occurs when infants identify with their external image (reflection). In a similar way, she suggests the same psychic effect occurs in Acconci’s work that fuses both the subject and object. This illusionary erasing of the difference between the subject and object repositions the technological electronic equipment [camera, video tapes] as mere accessories to the medium. According to Krauss the ‘medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object – an Other – and invest it in the Self.’[162]

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[157] Rosler, 49-50.
[158] Rosler, 31.
[159] Rosler, 50.
[160] Krauss, ‘Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,’ 50.
[161] Krauss, 57.

This psychological situation Krauss identifies as narcissism, which distinguishes it from other mediums. In comparison to other art mediums such as painting, which are reflexive in nature, video was unique for its reflective quality. She states:

> The difference is total. Reflection, when in the case of mirroring, is a move toward an external symmetry; while reflexiveness is a strategy to achieve a radical a-symmetry…reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between them.[163]

Krauss’ notion of reflection as fusion resonates with Lacan’s concept of extimacy as the non-distinction between the interior and exterior. She attributes this to the instantaneity of feedback of closed circuit video as a mirror-reflection, which severs the viewer from their surroundings as a form of ‘self-encapsulation’ where ‘body or psyche as its own surround – is everywhere.’[164] The inherent narcissism of video noted by Krauss would become evident beyond the art world through the YouTube and the popularity of vernacular video modes such as vlogging and bedroom performances, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Krauss’ essay provides the foundation for understanding how contemporary artists in this chapter engage with extimate avatars and the performed materiality of YouTube videos. Despite her relegation of the physical mechanisms of video to mere apparatus, Krauss does reinforce the critical role of the body as a central instrument; as she states:

> Because most of the work produced over the very short span of video art’s existence has used the human body as its central instrument. In the case of work on tape this has most often been the body of the artist-practitioner. In the case of video installations, it has usually been the body of the responding viewer. And no matter whose body has been selected for the occasion, there is a further condition which is always present. Unlike the other visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time – producing instant feedback.[165]

Krauss’ concept of the human body as a central instrument of video art parallels the trope of the ‘extimate avatar’ in digital spaces and online platforms, such as social media and YouTube. Further, the concept of instant feedback of early video work was expanded through the networked context of YouTube.

### 2.3 YouTube: Broadcast Yourself

YouTube is a public video-sharing platform founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim in June 2005. Like other Web 2.0 platforms, YouTube was to be used with much of the technological barriers removed that had previously prevented widespread sharing of video online. This technological innovation was not unique to YouTube and was shared by a number of competing web-based services that hosted (largely user-created) videos. At the time of its launch YouTube provided a simple integrated interface that made it easy for users to upload and view video.[166] In addition, the platform also simplified sharing by providing URLs and HTML codes that allowed videos to be embedded easily in other websites.[167] The relatively easy-to-use platform enabled users to upload videos with ease and to convert them into many different formats and share them.[168] Video platforms like YouTube with its low-tech usability enabled a shift in power that enabled everyday non-professionals to participate in the formerly exclusive world of professional media.

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[162] Krauss,’Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,’ 50.
[163] Krauss, 56-57.
[164] Krauss, 53.
[165] Krauss, 53.

Content on the YouTube platform is vast and includes vernacular video usually attributed to 'amateurs' as well as more traditional forms of media, such as music videos by 'big media' companies who are established within mainstream broadcasting, music and cinema industries. Burgess and Green (2010) classify YouTube participation into three groups. First are corporate 'big media' companies and large right holders.[169] The second group consists of web-TV companies, many of whom are traditional television producers making use of the internet to distribute niche programming. As Burgess and Green notes of this group, their 'resemblance to television content points to the way digital delivery options destabilize medium-dependent definitions of media forms.'[170] The third group represents the 'ordinary user' who does not represent mainstream media companies or institutions. While the classification 'ordinary user' suggests individual amateur participants, in reality it reflects a complex spectrum of participation on YouTube from casual viewing to engagement and identification in the community.[171] The spectrum of participation reflects Jenkins' concept of 'convergence culture,' where old and new, grass roots and corporate media collide.[172]

The iconic catchphrase of YouTube from 2005-2012, 'broadcast yourself,' was formative in framing YouTube as a platform for public self-expression that employed the trope of the extimate avatars. The call to action 'broadcast yourself' assisted in what Graeme Turner describes as the 'demotic turn,' referring to the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' in media through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio and YouTube.[173] Self-representation on YouTube employs the trope of the extimate avatar as an extension of an offline user. On YouTube, an extimate avatar takes the form of a profile page that features selected content from YouTube and the uploaded videos created by the individual. By uploading videos to YouTube (a public distribution platform) users create a public identity where their uploaded videos serve as a performative statement of their public identity.[174] Users can also create extimate avatars of themselves by turning themselves into content through vlogs, do-it-yourself tutorials, unboxing videos and musical performances.

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[166] Launched in 2005, the platform grew at the rapid rate of 75 percent a week and, by 2006, it had reached 13 million unique visits to the website.

[167] Cheng and Liu, 'Statistics and Social Network of YouTube Videos,' 229-38,

[168] Ding et al., 'Broadcast Yourself: Understanding YouTube Uploaders,' 361.

[169] Burgess and Green, 'The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional-Amateur Divide,' 92-93.

[170] Burgess and Green, 93.

[171] Lange (2017), in an ethnographic study of forty-one interviews, offers a more complex typology and classified participants as: 1) former participants who no longer upload videos but maintain an account and may view and comment; 2) casual users who do not have an account and tend to view videos specifically or when sent a link; 3) active participants are aware of issues and people in the YouTube community. They have an account and usually upload videos or leave comments on other's videos or channel pages; 4) YouTubers or 'Tubers,' intense users who engage frequently whether daily or weekly for an hour or more. These users identify as members of the YouTube community and often participate in YouTube debate and discussions; 5) YouTube celebrities who influence the discourse goals and activities on YouTube through their participation. Lange, 'Commenting on Comments: Investigating Responses to Antagonism on YouTube,'4.

[172] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 2-3.

[173] Turner, *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*, xiii.

Creating self-representations through video highlights the social networking functions of YouTube. According to boyd and Ellison, social networking websites share functions that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view lists of connections made by others within the system.[175] On YouTube, individuals can create a 'channel' that operates as a personalised profile. The channel displays biographical data, volunteered information (likes and dislikes), and a list of uploaded videos that can be sorted into 'playlists.' Subscription to the channels of other users is also present on an individual's channel, making visible their social network and their content interests. Content interests and uploaded content aggregate to form the public identity and interface of a user, and provide the grounds for initiating dialogue and engagement. Engagement is critical to the formation of social connection, which is realised through a range of activities including rating, commenting, sharing, critiquing, or responding through video-based content. The social potential to attract engagement (in the form of comments, shares, likes) highlight the generative nature of YouTube as a platform of mass self-communication.[176]

### 2.4 Artist as DJ, Programmer, Pro-Surfer and Distributor

Contemporary artistic engagement with YouTube and online video is an extension of early video artwork that developed in dialogue with and parallel to other media, such as television and public broadcasting. The introduction of online video-sharing platforms and social computing diversified the landscape of video production to include vernacular videos created through social networking, broadcast television and gallery-based works. The shifting landscape of the medium of video is described by scholar Henry Jenkins as the concept of 'convergence,' which he argues is not primarily technological:

> The circulation of media content – across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders – depends heavily on consumers' active participation. I will argue here against the idea that convergence should not be understood primarily as a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. Instead, convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content.[177]

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[174] Jarrett, 'Beyond Broadcast Yourself$^{TM}$: The Future of YouTube.'
[175] boyd and Ellison, 'Social Networking Websites Definition, History, and Scholarship,' 40.
[176] Castells, 'Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society,' 239.
[177] Jenkins, 'Welcome to Convergence Culture.'

Jenkins's notion of convergence highlights an expansive media ecology and the increased agency of consumers and producers, who are actively creating meaning and value through viewing and distribution. This cultural convergence is evident in the visibility of vernacular video, such as vlogs and mobile phone footage, included in mainstream broadcasting. In the context of contemporary art, the culture of convergence has also expanded video art to include new gestures, modes and aesthetics of vernacular video production. Artists drawing on and creating vernacular videos have introduced a new set of aesthetics and gestures such as mashup, rearranging, confiscating, remixing and sampling into the contemporary arts discourse.[178]

Conversely, the new landscape of video also extended a new space and audience to contemporary artists to create and display work via online platforms such as YouTube. Within the participatory culture of YouTube, artists were able to easily appropriate video content and images to create new works. The online platform also provided a free distribution platform for video work to new online audiences. This fluid practice is evident in the work of Australian artist and film maker Emile Zile, who critically re-uses media broadcasts, communication and online platforms. As part of the 2013 Channels Festival Biennial of Video Art critical forum, Emile Zile responded to the provocation 'how can video artists orient themselves towards or against the complex backdrop of networked technology, smart phones and prosumers of our current world?' in the form of a 'video letter.' Zile's letter, which is also shown on YouTube, is an 'unboxing' video – a derivative of vlogs where people film themselves unpacking and reviewing new products.[179] Zile's video letter, which he names a boxing video, riffs off the unboxing genre in a performative reversal where he places usurped analogue technologies into boxes.

**Figure 2.1** Emile Zile, *Sony Videorecorder AVC3420 CE Boxing* (Single channel online video, 1 minute and 12 seconds duration). Screen grab by author.

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[178] Mashup or mash-up is a general term used to indicate something that is made by recombining different things to create something new. Kessler and Schafer, 'Navigating YouTube: Constituting a Hybrid Information Management System,' 126.

[179] Unboxing is a genre of videos where new products, especially high technology consumer products, are unpacked. The owner captures the process on video and later uploads it to the web.

The vlog is shot in his studio and involves a review of the features of the 'Sony Videocorder AVC-3420 CE,' before placing it into the box, along with its power supply. The choice of technology is highly symbolic as the Videorecorder and other Sony technologies are often credited with making the medium of video accessible to contemporary artists. The association with early video art of the 60s and 70s is referenced in Zile's monologue when he refers to the camera as 'ancient Naim June Pak styles.'  The performative reversal of the boxing video is a symbolic archiving of video technology that alludes to the end of video as an exclusive medium of video artists. The vlog format and the artist's direct address to camera, inviting interaction from viewers and subscribers to the channel, points to the new environment of video as a medium that is now open to all.[180]

In addition to creating video for YouTube, contemporary artists have also engaged with YouTube as a source for creative material that could be appropriated and rearranged and edited to create new video works. Art historian and curator Nicholas Bourriaud describes this as the art of postproduction, artworks created on the basis of pre-existing works and objects already in circulation on the 'cultural market.' Postproduction artists and artworks contribute to the culture of convergence, as Bourriaud notes:

> These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work…It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects.[181]

According to Bourriaud, postproduction art works frame songs, movies and other cultural products as raw material to be repurposed and reformed through postproduction processes. Unlike appropriation or collage, postproduction artworks reference their cultural sources without subsuming or being reduced to them. The referential quality of postproduction works reflects the wider socio-cultural impact of the internet in the eradication of the traditional boundaries between production and consumption and original and copy. Further, postproduction works, particularly those that use vernacular video modes, introduce the socially constructed aesthetic and value systems of social networks into the gallery context. On a symbolic level, postproduction video works that draw on vernacular video reference both the aesthetics and cultural values of contemporary art and the vernacular creativity of social networks, without being subsumed or reduced to them.

Artists creating postproduction works influenced a re-theorising the role of the artist to encompass the activities of the producer, director and editor. For Bourriaud, postproduction artists extract modes of production from forms of knowledge created in the 'cultural chaos' generated by the 'appearance of the Net.'[182] Bourriaud argues that postproduction artists operate as the figure of the 'DJ and the programmer' who share in the task of selecting 'cultural objects' and inserting them into new contexts. Both the DJ and programmer represent modes of production that utilise things that are already produced. A clear example of this is Christian Marclay's moving image *The Clock,* 2010, a 24-hour montage compiled of thousands of film clips. For Bourriaud, the figure of the DJ compiles a 'set' of pre-existing music for a live audience to create and maintain a desired atmosphere. Through turntablist gestures of scratching and remixing, the DJ is able to add their own musical layer over the playlist – sometimes creating an identifiable style through their selection and links made between music.[183] The figure of the 'programmer' reconfigures existing artworks and recodes them to create alternative narratives and scenarios. As Bourriaud notes, for postproduction artists who adopt programming gestures, existing materials are seen as 'precarious structures to be used as tools.' [184] According to Bourriaud, both artistic figures operate as 'semionauts,' creating pathways and linkages through an expansive network of signs.[185] The ability to create pathways of meanings and connections through socially constructed signs highlights the importance of postproduction art works as culturally meaningful objects.

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[180] Emile Zile has a series of 'boxing' videos on his YouTube channel.

[181] Since the 1990s, there has been a growing interest in and application of material or traces of material originating from the media. A prominent characteristic of these art works reflects an interested in the application of the technolgical means, material sources, language and iconography of the mass media, in short, a re-articulation of elements of media culture. Bourriaud, Schneider and Berman, *Postproduction*, 13

182 Bourriaud, Schneider and Berman, 14.

In addition to Bourriaud, artist and writer Marissa Olsen offers another specific framework of the 'pro-surfer' to acknowledge the platforms and websites as additional sites of production. The term 'pro-surfer' was coined in 2006 by Nasty Nets, an internet surfing club who posted materials they found online to the Nasty Nets website. Olsen extends the term to describe works (moving and still image) made through a process of web surfing (browsing).[186] Pro-surfer works have resemblance to the art of found photography, yet the emphasis on process of borrowing transcends it, as Olsen argues:

> I see the work as bearing surface resemblance to the use of found photography while lending itself to close reading along the lines of formalism. Ultimately, I will argue that the work of pro surfers transcends the art of found photography insofar as the act of finding is elevated to a performance in its own right, and the ways in which images are appropriated distinguishes this practice from one of quotation by taking them out of circulation and reinscribing them with new meaning and authority.[187]

Olsen's emphasis on finding as a performance in its own right highlights the actions and agency of the artist to create 'new' meanings and associations through their works.

Pro-surfer works use a copy and paste aesthetic, lifting and repurposing digital content including images, sound files, YouTube videos and film. By 'lifting' digital content from the online networks of circulation and re-editing, rearranging or reconfiguring, the works are re-inscribed with new meanings. Olsen draws parallels between this process and montage theory of Lev Kuleshov and the 'Kuleshov Effect' where meaning is derived from sequential shots, dialectically constructing a narrative. The representational strategies of pro-surfer works are similar in that each 'lifted' piece is put into conversation with the other, 'so that the combination creates a third (or fourth) or fifth 'term.'[188] Pro-surfer's works are not derivative rather they are 'dialectical' creating a constellation of objects that 'add up to something greater than the sum of their parts.'[189] Thus pro-surfer works offer unique cultural insights about online content and the language and meanings that can be derived from them.

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[183] It is common for DJs to insert a sound-clip of their DJ name into the mix as an authorial identifier and brand.
[184] Bourriaud, Schneider and Berman, 46.
[185] Bourriaud, Schneider and Berman,18.
[186] Cornell, 'Professional Surfer.'
[187] Olson, 'Lost Not found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture,' 159.

The artists discussed in this chapter draw on both the dynamics and methodologies of postproduction and pro-surfing to create video works that offer an artistic splice through the archive of YouTube. YouTube functions as an archive that stores and cultivates its own information, however, as Geoffrey Bowker states: 'what is stored in these archives is not facts, but disaggregated classifications that can at will be reassembled to take the form of facts about the world.[190] On YouTube these classifications take the form of titles and tags that are folksonomies – user-created terms for organising content. The works in this chapter involve the artist browsing YouTube, searching for specific content that reflects the artist's thematic enquiries. These works are then edited through various postproduction techniques, at times borrowing the dynamics and aesthetics of the content itself. While all works have been shown as offline gallery works, several exist online within the networked platforms of YouTube and Vimeo.

### 2.5 Extimate avatars and the rise of DIY celebrity

The mass circulation of personal content on YouTube and other social media platforms also enabled the manufacturing of new and independent forms of fame and celebrity. Turner describes online forms of celebrity as the 'DIY celebrity,' marking a distinct shift where opportunities for celebrity are no longer reserved for the elite – rather it has entered the expectation of the general public.[191] With the ability to produce, upload and distribute video content, ordinary people aspiring to fame and celebrity could publicize themselves (talents/skills/opinions) following what Abidin (2018) describes as a 'DIY template.' This template required users to produce themselves as public content, a process of extending their identities as external images. According to Turner, one of the effects of celebrity being far more accessible is the proliferation of different forms of DIY, in particular 'celebrification' (ordinary people becoming celebrities), which has become a familiar mode of 'cyber-self-presentation' – what this thesis describes as exitmate avatars.[192]

Pursuits of micro-celebrity through YouTube created structured and prescribed forms of self-representation, following a DIY template that was geared towards profiling and showcasing an individual's talent, skill or personality. Berlin-based Serbian artist Oliver Laric explored this phenomenon in *50/50* (2007) a remix video comprised solely of YouTube clips of amateur performers rapping karaoke style direct to camera. The video work comprises 50 video clips of amateur performers rapping three songs, *In da Club, Candy Shop* and *How We Do* by 50 Cent, an American-based hip-hop artist. The clips are edited together to create a seamless performance between geographically disparate performers. Laric's work opens with performers on gym equipment emulating the opening scene of the music video *In Da Club,* where 50 Cent enters the frame upside down from gym equipment in a science lab. Common tropes of Gangster Rap, such as violence, misogyny and crime, are embedded in the lyrics of the songs and are also part of the artist's public persona.[193]

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[188] Olsen, 'Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Virtual Culture,' 165.
[189] Olsen, 164.
[190] Bowker, Memory Practices in the Sciences, 18.
[191] Turner, Ordinary People and the Media, 3-4.
[192] Turner, 3-4.

In 2008, Laric made another version of his work *50/50* (2008) where he created a remix using all new clips from YouTube videos – highlighting the mass availability of YouTube performance videos. Both versions speak to the popularity of performing in front of a camera and embodying the personal style and persona of rapper 50 Cent. This is evident in the self-fashioning of a number of performers in the work who emulate the clothing style (hooded sweatshirts, glasses and caps worn askew) of the rapper. Although not explicitly mentioned by Laric, both versions may also demonstrate much broader cultural aspirations, such as the pursuit of fame and celebrity via distribution on YouTube.

### 2.6 YouTube video as a template for the extimate avatar

The aggregation of performances by Laric that follow a similar structure and format reflects the much broader democratisation of forms of fame and celebrity. Such pursuits for celebrity and fame on the internet are described by Theresa Senft as 'microcelebrity,' where individuals broadcast themselves using digital technologies and platforms, in an attempt to accumulate popularity and fame by performing on the internet.[194] These performances require individuals to create a public image of themselves that is perceived as interactive, real and authentic by their audiences.[195] While micro-celebrity is native to the internet, there are many examples where performers have been 'discovered' by the music industry and secured contracts as recording artists.[196] This trajectory of fame is not unique to YouTube or the internet, but can be seen as a continued methodology of 'discovery' in traditional media where talent is 'found' or scouted from the general public.

In another work, *Touch My Body* (2008), Laric creates a template that acts a platform for performances on YouTube. The work is an edited version of Mariah Carey's music video for a song of the same name released in February 2008. The narrative of the original music video follows the sexual fantasy of a computer technician 'Compu Nerd' on a house call to Carey's home to fix her internet. The video progresses through a range of fantasy scenarios of Carey and the 'Compu nerd' that draw on the popular trope of a 'beauty,' a hyper-feminine woman pursued by the socially awkward and nervous 'geek.' In Laric's version of *Touch my Body,* Laric modifies the original music video by masking the background imagery in Chroma green screen, masking a total of five thousand frames. Laric's masking leaves Carey's body visible creating a template for other users to create chroma-keyed remixes.[197]

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[193] In May 2000, 50 Cent was shot nine times at close range outside his grandmother's house in South Jamaica.

[194] The DIY celebrity template allowed celebrity aspirants to garner attention by publicizing themselves to audiences of interest.

[195] Such demands for authenticity may account for the private staging of the performances on YouTube and are reflective of the co-constructed nature of micro-celebrity. Abidin, Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online, 12.

[196] Recording artists who were found on YouTube include pop music artists Justin Bieber, Tori Kelly and James Bay. Brione, '12 Major Artist Who got their start on YouTube.'

**Figure 2.2.** Oliver Laric, *Touch My Body* (Single channel online video, 4 minutes and 18 seconds duration), 2008. Screen grab by author.

Laric's video was released on YouTube as a template to encourage further Chroma-keyed remixes, as the green screen enables any background image to be inserted.[198] To attract more viewers and encourage further remixes, Laric used the same title for his work as the original song and adjusted his tags. Within the networked environment of YouTube, Laric's template became a platform for self-expression as users were free to download the video template and edit the work as they chose. Their versions (a term Laric would explore in other works) could then be uploaded onto YouTube as content that contributed to their profile and self-presentation on the platform. Ironically, Carey's song, which speaks to privacy and surveillance culture, also mentions the posting of videos on YouTube in the lyrics: 'If there's a camera up in her then it's gonna leave with me when I do. If there's a camera up in here then I best not catch it on YouTube.' Laric's work encourages the very process of posting videos to YouTube and enables the possibility for everyday users to achieve visibility and potentially fame. As Marisa Olsen notes 'fame is nothing if not a self-production.'[199]

As a YouTube video, Laric's work becomes a platform for producing extimate avatars, encouraging users to insert themselves or their imagery into the work itself. As digital media scholar Jean Burgess notes, YouTube videos have 'generative' qualities, in that they have the potential to produce value to the extent that it acts as a 'hub for further creative activity by a wider range participants in the social network.’[200] The linked processes of consumption and production defines the commonly used term of ‘prosumer,’ which in the context of YouTube describes the agency of users who are simultaneously consumers and producers of video content.[201] This agency and networked creativity was incorporated into the gallery-based presentation of *50/50* at Seventeen Gallery New York in 2008. For this exhibition, Laric exhibited *50/50* as a two-channel projection featuring his Chroma-key (green screen) work alongside versions made by other users on YouTube.

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[197] Chroma keying is a postproduction technique of layering images and footage.

[198] The video has subsequently been removed due to breach of copyright.

[199] Olsen, 'Go Ahead, Touch Her.'

**Figure 2.3.** Public versions of Oliver Laric, *Touch My Body (*Green Screen Version single channel video, 4 minutes and 18 seconds duration*)*, 2008. Still.

Across the different versions of the video, Mariah Carey functions as a symbolic and visual referent. Despite the masking of the background, the fantasy narrative of the original video is enacted by Carey alone, creating the opportunity for users to adopt the role of the ‘Compu Nerd’ character. In a still image taken from a version created by a YouTube user, the male figure adopts the character of the Compu Nerd and enacts the pillow fight scene from the original music video (Figure 2.4). In other versions still available on YouTube, the green screen enabled others to sing and perform alongside Carey, emulating her performance and persona, as described in one video caption, ‘My Diva VS his diva…’[202] In other versions on YouTube, the template is used in ways that deviate from the narrative of the original music video for comedic or technical effect.[203] In these instances the visual image of Carey becomes critical to what Richard Johnson describes as the 'identity work' of others. [204]

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[200] Burgess, '"All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us"? Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture.’ 102.

[201] Toffler, *The Third Wave,* 275.

[202] Moreismore, ‘Touch my Body (The 2 green screen divas version).’

**Figure 2.4**. Public versions of Oliver Laric, *Touch My Body (*Green Screen Version single channel video, 4 minutes and 18 seconds duration*)*, 2008. Still.

The template created in Laric's work invited people to create their extimate avatar in proximity to celebrities for the viewing of 'others' online. Although in some instances the performances re-enacted the video or emulated the artist, they both encouraged a form of intimate self-presentation as extimate public forms. Psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller builds on Jacques Lacan's notion of 'extimacy' that describes that which is most intimate us as exterior as 'other'. For Alain-Miller the 'other' is always present in our sense of self, as he argues:

> In this sense, the extimacy of the subject is the Other. This is what we find in 'The Agency of the Letter' when Lacan speaks of 'this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my identity to myself, it is he who stirs me' (*Ecrits: A Selection,* 172; translation modified) – where the extimacy of the other is tied to the vacilation of the subjects identity to himself.[205]

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[203] Examples of this on YouTube include versions with Getty Images inserted, and Disney Movies.

[204] Through an analysis of the global mourning of the death of Diana Princess of Wales in 1997, Johnson demonstrates how a celebrity such as the late Diana was available as a public figure and 'object' in the identity construction of others. According to Johnson, her public 'availability' enabled four main forms of relational and dialogic attachment; representative, recognition, identification and transferred feelings. First, she operated as a representative figure of 'British' identity; as a figure that could recognize others as good; as the 'object of continuous identification and dis-identification;' and as an 'object of many transferred feelings, feelings that had little to do with her own life and death, and everything to do with the lives of the members of her public. Johnson, 'Exemplary Differences: Mourning (and not mourning) a princess,' 15-37.

[205] Jacques Lacan quoted in Miller, 'Extimite,' 77.

Miller's definition of extimacy as a parasitic body that is always tied describes the presence of the gaze in Laric's works where the individuals create themselves as other, and in relation to celebrities and others that maybe watching online. Defining yourself against a celebrity requires both a process of recognition and othering, as Johnson notes

> The other must first occupy the same psychic cultural space as the self. A version of the other is internalised or introjected; it becomes an image or 'object' – the Other. But the image of the Other must also, in this paranoid pattern of self-production, be disavowed, expelled, projected 'outside.'[206]

Although in the process of 'othering' an image/object of a public figure is disavowed and considered 'outside,' they remain influential in shaping an individual's sense of 'self'. Philosopher Slavoj Zizek utilises the example of national identity to demonstrate the ongoing connection between the 'other' and the 'self.' Typically, national identity is constructed against other nations via a border; this same border reflects for each nation an internal limit. This inflection reflects an interior demarcation of identity defined within the nation and amongst its citizens. Zizek's notion of the border is useful in understanding self-presentations on YouTube as a form of alterity constructed in relation to 'others,' including celebrity figures, and equally in relation to the interior context of YouTube that generates its own codified forms of representation.

These complex forms of identity, as expressed through extimate avatars, is reflected in the video works of New Zealand-based artist Janet Lilo.[207] In 2006, Lilo began to explore the phenomena of people singing on YouTube and created a series of remix videos using excerpts of videos taken from the internet.[208] Guided by her interest in popular music, Lilo used popular chart hits of the time, such as *Like You'll Never See Me Again* (2007) by Alicia Keys and *So Sick* (2006) by Neyo, as the search terms to find and collect YouTube performances. Her subsequent remixes, which also use the same titles of the songs, are carefully edited together to create a single collective performance. Lilo's remix has a strong focus on post-production editing in her use of split screens, multiple sound channels and jump cuts to create juxtapositions that could not happen in real time.[209] For Lilo, these remix videos are a form of collaboration as reflected in the closing credits of her videos which state her intention:

> the purpose of this edit was to collaborate youtube singers with other youtube singers as a random mix. I take no credit for the talent of any of the singers featured and in fact, I am a fan of anyone who has the courage to put themselves out there. Well done guys.[210]

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[206] Johnson. 'Exemplary Differences: Mourning (and not mourning) a princess', 24.

[207] The term 'remix' refers to the form of media and the process of taking cultural artefacts, such as moving and static images, online videos, combining them and manipulating them to create new meanings and forms. Knobel and Lankshear, 'Remix: The Art and Craft of Endless Hybridization,' 22-33.

[208] These video works, whilst stand-alone works, have predominantly been shown in her evolving installation *Top 16*, which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter One. The videos were originally posted on YouTube but later removed by the artist.

[209] Weir, 'Jump Cut: Music Video Aesthetics,' 4.

[210] Text quotes from credits of Lilo, *Kiss me Like You'll Never See Me Again*.

The collaborative nature of the work is highlighted further in the credits, where Lilo lists the performers' YouTube profile names, recognising them as artists and as searchable profiles. Within the credits, the original artist is listed simply as one of the many performers Lilo has selected.

Lilo's remix videos demonstrate the relational and extimate dynamic between the self/other proposed by Zizek. In *Kiss Me Like You'll Never See Me Again* (2008), she compiles numerous videos of people singing to backing tracks or acapella direct to camera. Throughout the remix Lilo splices in images of the artist Alicia Keys from the original music clip, at times as a single frame and occasionally as split screens alongside other YouTube performances. In one scene, Lilo replaces the voice of Alicia Keys with that of one of the amateur performers. Whilst this can be understood as a playful edit on the part of the artist, it creates an audible distance from the artist as a silenced public figure or 'other,' whom the YouTube singers are trying to emulate in their own self-presentations. Further it reflects the much larger shifts in cultural values around original/copy and amateur/celebrity, as Lilo observes:

> You don't have to be famous, but you can get famous. Some of these people get millions and millions of hits sometimes more than the original singers…which is quite interesting.[211]

**Figure 2.5.** Janet Lilo, *Kiss Me Like You'll Never See Me Again* (Remix video, colour, sound, 4 minutes and 30 seconds duration), 2008. Consecutive frames screenshot by author.

The continued influence of the original artist in Lilo's remix videos highlights the ways in which celebrities (and others, including other viewers) remain 'proximate and intimate' to the identity of everyday amateur singers on YouTube.[212] Through her remix, Lilo virtually collapses the geographical distance between YouTube performers and the social distance between the amateur performers and the original artist that is not possible in real life. Lilie Chouliaraki describes this non-reciprocal involvement with public personalities as intimacy at a distance that reflects a constant tension in the 'spectator-celebrity relationship.' As she states:

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[211] Lilo, 'Janet Lilo, Pecha Kucha Night, Manukau Edition, 2008.'
[212] Johnson, 'Exemplary Differences: Mourning (and not mourning) a princess,' 25.

> This is the tension between spectators feeling close to their idols while simultaneously knowing that it is impossible to establish physical contact with them. In this sense, intimacy at a distance express both tensions of mediation. It expresses the tension between proximity and distance – feeling close but unable to approach the person – and between watching and acting – seeing the idol on screen, but being unable to do something with or for that person.[213]

This proximity and tension is given visual form in Lilo's final sequence of her remix video which edits all of the YouTube performers around a central frame of the artist singing alongside them.

**Figure 2.6.** Janet Lilo, *Kiss Me Like You'll Never See Me Again* (Remix video, colour, sound, 4 minutes and 30 seconds duration), 2008. Screenshot.

### 2.7 YouTube as sites for codified performances

Amateur performances videos on YouTube are site specific and reflect their own aesthetics and visual language that draws on existent modes, as discussed in pervious examples. However, as endemic to the social network platforms, they are also 'screen reliant' and, as video objects, function as communicative windows to new spaces and networks. Art historian Kate Mondloch distinguishes 'screen reliant' as opposed to 'screen based' to signal the screen as a performative category in its own right. According to Mondloch, screens can operate as a connective interface to another virtual space that frames a view and allows for viewing through to another space. The screen thus operates as a material object and a virtual window.[214] The viewer-screen interface proposed by Mondloch is useful in considering performance and performativity on YouTube as codified behaviours. She states:

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[213] Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, 21.

> The viewer-screen connection is a site of radical inter-implication: it includes the projection screen and other material conditions of screening, but also encompasses sentient bodies and psychic desires, institutional codes and discursive constructs.[215]

On YouTube, performances of self-representation are shaped partly by the participatory culture of the online platform. By watching and creating videos and dispersing them online, YouTube users generate their own values and meaning as part of an evolving cultural system of representation.[216] Through different kinds of engagement, users on YouTube collectively create cultural codes and conventions for specific types of video. This includes the technical equipment, such as webcam and mobile phones, and their formal application in terms of framing, lighting, angles and sound. In addition to the formal properties, engagement also shapes the conventions, including the definition of appropriate content, prescribed gender roles and the distinction between private and public. Whilst performances can be seen as extimate self-representations, they are collectively defined through the cultural system of YouTube.

### 2.8 Remakes as extimate performances

The construction of self-representation as extimate and codified performances of identity are also evident in the work of American artist Amie Siegel. *My Way 1* and *My Way 2* lifts music 'remake' videos of amateur performances of two songs that share the title 'My Way'. As the title suggests, the video works explore the construction of individualism through YouTube performances. Siegel treats YouTube as an archive through which to explore and appropriate content as 'found footage' to create her video works. Siegel's work highlights how YouTube videos communicate a capitalist-defined individualism through the dynamic of posting and responding.[217] Through her aggregation and editing of YouTube remakes, Siegel examines the codified nature of performances online as vehicles for gender identities, sexual orientation and global culture.[218]

*In My Way 1,* Siegel creates a compilation of 60 musical cover performances (57 girls and 3 boys) singing *Gotta Go My Own Way,* a song taken from the hugely popular television movie *High School Musical*, aimed at children between the ages of 8-12.[219] The global success of the movie is reflected in the sheer number of videos compiled in Siegel's videos montage, as well as the diversity of languages, including French, German and Portuguese. Siegel's editing of the 60 video excerpts subverts the conventional music cover performances, which have a definitive beginning and end, marked by the performance of the song.[220] Instead, Siegel's editing extends the performance to 9 minutes, which stops and starts several times at different points of the song.

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[214] Mondloch, 'Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art,' 3.

[215] Mondloch, 3.

[216] Historian Lisa Gitelmen argues that all forms of media are cultural systems. She defines media as 'socially realized structures of communication that include technological forms, associated protocols and collocation of different people sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.' Gitelmen, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, 7.

[217] Amie Siegel artist website, 'My Way.'

[218] Within the category of musical performance is a diversity of videos that range from amateur music videos to first-person musical performances, which are paradigmatic of YouTube user-created content.

[219] In 2006 and 2007, the film contributed $100 million to Disney's profits. Reuters, 'Disney plans "Haunted High School Musical."'

**Figure 2.7.** Amie Siegel, *My Way 1* (Video, colour, sound, 9 minutes duration), 2009, Walker Art Centre Minneapolis. Installation view.

**Figure 2.8.** Amie Siegel, *My Way 2* (Video, colour, sound, 12 minutes duration) 2009, Walker Art Centre Minneapolis. Installation view.

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[220] The original music video is 3.5 minutes long; however, this time varies between musical covers on YouTube.

In *My Way 2*, Siegel compiles YouTube covers of the song *My Way* by Frank Sinatra, an iconic swansong. In total there are 39 video excerpts in this collage of male performers. Following a similar format to *My Way 1,* this video is 12 minutes long with similar rhythmic editing, where the song starts and stops at various points. In contrast to *My Way 1*, this video work is predominantly comprised of cover performances by males performing alone in isolated spaces, such as basements, living rooms, kitchens and dens. The song is performed in several language and includes cover performances of the original French song 'comme d'habitude' released in 1967 by Claude François, and co-written with Jacques Revaux.

Siegel's editing in both works reconstructs the dialogical process of posting and reposting videos, characteristic of YouTube performances. In *My Way 1,* a performer reaches towards the computer to adjust the volume, and the next frame is a new video performance that begins with a performer who turns up the volume on their computer. Similarly, in *My Way 2*, one performer will sing the first line of a verse followed by the next frame that is a new video performance of an individual singing the remaining lines. These transitions create a dialogue connecting physically isolated performers, proclaiming their individuality through choice of song and video medium. As Siegel comments, 'there is a paradox in their collective performance of a song that proclaims individuality and yet they are collectively proclaiming this together from the privacy of their homes.' [221]

### 2.9 Publicly Private Bedroom Performers

The aggregation of performers in *My Way 1* and *My Way 2* demonstrates a new form of mediated visibility that blurs the distinction between private and public spaces.[222] Thompson notes that the development of new communications media gave rise to a new de-spatialized forms of visibility that were shaped by the properties of the media itself. Thompson states that this form of mediated visibility was not reciprocal, and was capable of stretching the field of vison across time and space:

> The field of vision is uni-directional: the viewer can see the distant others who are being filmed or photographed but the distant others cannot, in most circumstances, see them. Individuals can be seen by many viewers without themselves being able to see these viewers, while the viewers are able to see distant others without being seen by them. [223]

This new form of uni-directional visibility is reflected in Siegel's works and the staging of cameras in domestic settings such as bedrooms, living rooms and basements, which are perceived largely as private and not visible.

The blurring of private/public in Siegel's work reflects a new kind of pervasive visibility that creates an accessible privacy where aspects of the intimate are made public. Privacy usually signals the criterion of visibility as things deemed private are 'things that we are able and/or entitled to keep hidden, sheltered or withdrawn from others.'[224] As Kim Sheehan (2002) elaborates, 'Individuals have privacy to the extent that others have limited access to information about them, to the intimacies of their lives, to their thoughts or their bodies.'[225] In Siegel's work the repetition of private sites, such as bedrooms used as public stages, reflect how notions of the private and public are relative and shifting concepts. In exploring the private and public dichotomy on YouTube, Patricia Lange notes the ways in which public and private are reproduced at different levels, by drawing on Susan Gal's definition of private and public as a fractal distinction:

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[221] Siegel in communication with author via Skype, 12 December 2015.

[222] Turner, *Ordinary People and the Media : The Demotic Turn*, 35.

[223] Thompson, 'The New Visibility,' 35.

[224] Weintraub, *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, 6.

> This means it is a particular kind of indexical. Whatever the local, historical specific content of the dichotomy, the distinction between public and private can be reproduced repeatedly by projecting it onto narrower or broader ones. Or it can be projected onto different social 'objects'– activities, identities, institutions, spaces and interactions – that can be further categorized into private and public parts.[226]

On YouTube, the fractal distinction between public/private is a social pattern that is constantly repeating. For example, although YouTube is a public platform, it can be viewed within the privacy of the home. Similarly, a video maker may address a personal subject whilst others address collective issues that are intended for a larger, public audience.[227] Siegel's videos reflect what Lange describes as individuals being 'publicly private,' where individuals share 'private experiences through video but do so in a 'public way' by revealing personal identity information.'[228] At the same time, the performers have the ability, if they choose, to place limitations on the video in terms of access and content. Lange comments on this duality:

> The first part of this compound expression thus refers to the amount of identity information imparted by video makers. The second part refers to the available physical access to the video and to the interpretative content that may be understood only by the video maker and a few viewers.[229]

Both Siegel's works reveal very public video making and viewing practices, where individuals make public bedrooms, basements and personal studios that are often considered highly private and personalised domains. Jean Burgess describes this genre of first-person musical performances as 'bedroom musical performances' because of their typical situatedness in private spaces such as the bedroom. [230] In *My Way 1*, the performers are predominantly younger girls and teenagers performing in their bedroom spaces. This is reflective of the target audience of the film, which aimed at youth aged between 8-12 years of age, for whom the bedroom is a significant site of self-expression and exploration through play and decoration of walls and surfaces.[231] In Siegel's remix, the performers are framed by their surroundings posters, bookshelves and soft toys – a repeating trope that reflects the collectively authored and highly codified nature of YouTube performance. While these performances are framed within the physically private spaces of the home, the presence of the camera and the later uploading of the video onto YouTube 'enact' a performance within a 'hybrid publicly private' arena.[232]

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[225] Sheehan, 'Toward a Typology of Internet Users and Online Privacy Concerns,' 22.
[226] Gal, 'A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,' 81.
[227] Lange, 'Publicly Private and Privately Public: Social Networking on YouTube', 369.
[228] Lange, 370.
[229] Lange, 370.
[230] Burgess, '"All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us?" Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture,' 110.
[231] Horst, 'Aesthetics of the Self: Digital Mediations,' 100.

Bedroom musical performances on YouTube evoke an extimacy that is private and public and resonates with the dramaturgical model of identity performance by sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman articulates two distinct spaces of performance: backstage and front stage. As can be extrapolated from the theatrical reference, front stage indicates the public space through which individuals perform their roles in front of an audience. These extimate dynamics are present on YouTube and in Siegel's gallery-based work, where the performer continues to act as if the observer were observing.[233] Backstage represents the private and intimate space that is defined by the absence of an audience and where performers are able to relax and step out of their role. Online, in the mediated networks of YouTube, there is a blurring between the front stage and backstage that is reflected in Siegel's work. What appears to be an 'intimate private space,' such as a bedroom or living room, is also, through its uploading to YouTube and its re-presentation as an artwork, under the gaze of a large unknown audience

### 2.10 Glass Bedroom

The compilation of YouTube performances videos in *My Way 1* and *My Way 2* contains attributes of both private and public space. In applying Goffman's model, the public 'front stage' of the performance is entered through the private space of the performers' bedrooms, basements and other living spaces that contain their personal, sometimes intimate relationships. Dr Erika Pearson uses the metaphor of the 'glass bedroom' to describe the inherent tension of online performances. She states:

> The metaphor can take a number of forms, but at its core it describes a bedroom with walls made of glass. Inside the bedroom, private conversations and intimate exchanges occur, each with varying awareness of distant friends and strangers moving past transparent walls that separate groups from more deliberate and constructed 'outside displays'. The glass bedroom itself is not entirely private space, nor a true backstage space as Goffman articulated, though it takes on elements of both over the course of its use. It is a bridge that is partially private and public, constructed online through signs and language.[234]

In relation to Siegel's performances, the metaphor of the glass bedroom highlights how self-representation in YouTube videos is constructed with an awareness beyond the glass walls. The sequence of performance videos makes visible the network of exchange that links performers through the metaphoric glass walls of bedrooms where ideas, common signs and symbols are shared. The repetition of these symbols functions as a code that is commonly read and understood by others across the networks of YouTube.[235]

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[232] Joo,'Bedrooms and DJs Spaces and Identities.'
[233] Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, 81-88.
[234] Pearson. 'All the World Wide Web's a stage: The performance of identity in online social networks.'
[235] Pearson

Sigel's work allows for a closer examination of the codified language that informs and shapes gender performativity on YouTube. According to scholar Judith Butler, it extends the notion of performance and performativity as not a singular act 'but, rather a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.' As Butler argues, gender identity is created through the repetition of acts that communicates and creates an identity. She writes:

> In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.'[236]

Siegel's video works reflect a visual sameness between performers; however, these are not merely voluntary choices. Each performance is a considered repetition of dominant norms and conventions. As Butler states, 'the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene.'[237] For example, in *My Way 1*, the young female performers enact the tropes of the 'tween,' a concept and age category between childhood and adolescence (9-12 years old) that is reinforced in the Disney film *High School Musical* and its subsequent products.[238] The female protagonist of the film *Gabriella* (played by actress Vanessa Hudgens) is the romantic love interest-cum-Brainiac. Her character is defined by a feminine and scholarly power, which is emblematic of the trope of the 'new girl hero' figure common in contemporary Disney films. The global success of the film also purveyed this archetype to impressionable tween audiences as the aspirational model for young girls.[239] The impact can be seen in Siegel's compilation of predominantly young female performers, most of whom appear to be in the target audience of the film. Their collective performances present mediated affinity with the film and its female protagonist, but also of the gender depictions of the Disney Canon where 'girls can achieve, can have a voice and can gain independence (we are told) but the only way they will achieve access to those rewards is if they conform to the 'inhibitions' of gender.' [240]

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[236] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,' 519.

[237] Butler, 526.

[238] The category 'tween' is a play on the words 'teen' and 'between,' which emerged in the early 1990s to identify a marketing demographic of young people 'between' childhood and adolescence – 9-12 years old kids. Bickford, 'The New "tween" Music Industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop and an Emerging Childhood Counterpublic,' 418.

[239] Symonds, '"We're all in this Together": being girls and boys in High School Musical,' 182.

[240] Symonds, 182.

**Figure 2.9.** Amie Siegel, *My Way 2* (Video, colour, sound, 12 minutes duration), 2009. Video still. © Amie Siegel. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery.

Pearson's notion of the glass bedroom and codified performance is also evident in the gender expressions of male performers in *My Way 2.* Siegel's aggregation of performances in *My Way 2* reflects a form of domestic masculinity defined through the creation of male spaces. As Moisio and Beruchashvili argue, the creation of male spaces is based on the premise of the home as women's domain, their symbolic dominion over the home also capable of undermining their identities. Interestingly, the creation of spatially segregated spaces within the home, commonly referred to as 'man caves,' are spaces such as basements, workshops, garages and barbeques, all of which have accrued masculine associations.[241] Male spaces are spatially and symbolically demarcated and are created through masculine possessions that allow men to affirm their identities as men within the home. This is evident across Siegel's work that highlights such possessions including Heineken beer signs, play back devices and microphones reiterating, as she suggests, the 'masculine occupations of space and technology.'[242]

Their declarative performances of Frank Sinatra's *My Way* in Siegel's work is a reiteration of the masculinity associated with the song and the artist. Through his music and cinematic roles and his own persona (working class roots, Italian-American heritage, civil rights activism and bachelor rat pack persona), Sinatra actively shaped debates about American male identity in the 1940s-1950s. Not surprisingly, the majority of the performers in *My Way 2* are adult males, declaring their individuality through Sinatra's swansong.[243] This symbolic performance of masculinity is quietly contrasted by Siegel's careful insertion of excerpts of performances of the original French song 'comme d'habitude,' which she notes is a queer anthem.[244]

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[241] Moisio & Beruchashvili, 'Mancaves and Masculinity,' 16. [not in bibl]

[242] Amie Siegel artist website, 'My Way.'

[243] Contemporary uses of the song in national events, including the inaugural ball for President Trump, is reflective of how the song has also come to represent the notion of American individualism.Glinton, 'A Toast To 'My Way,' America's Anthem of Self-Determination.'

**Figure 2.10**. Amie Siegel, *My Way 2* (Video, colour, sound, 12 minutes duration), 2009. Video still. © Amie Siegel. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery.

### 2.11 Extimacy and self-disclosure

The metaphor of the glass bedroom as a site of public/private performance satisfies an underlying human desire to show or exteriorize intimate or private life. Psychoanalyst and psychologist Serge Tissesron borrows Lacan's term extimacy to describe this desire for self-disclosure. Tisseron defines extimacy as 'a tendency that is essential to the human being and consists of the desire to communicate the inner world to the outer world, a communication that would enrich intimacy.'[245] Tisseron asserts that extimacy is not a form of exhibitionism, because it is designed to show the potential to attract the interest of others. He states:

> …the desire for extimacy consists in showing fragments of one's intimacy whose value one ignores, at the risk of provoking the disinterest or even the rejection of one's interlocutors, but with the hope that their eyes recognise the value and validate it at the same time in our own eyes.[246]

According to Tisseron, extimate self-presentations can involve displaying fragments of the intimate to the gaze of others for validation. In the context of YouTube, validation occurs through engagement in the form of views, likes and dislikes, comments and sharing. Attention and validation on an individual level can inspire further creative activity and create affinity to other users on YouTube. Validation en masse can also influence large-scale collective action (both positive and negative) and the creation of micro-celebrities, whose popularity is premised on feelings of connection and responsiveness from the platform.[247] On a micro-level, individual validation through video can facilitate affinity between users and facilitate social networks.

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[244] Artist's communication with the author.
[245] Tisseron, 'Intimacy and Extimacy,' Section: Intimacy, Extimacy and Self Disclosure.'
[246] Tisseron.

### 2.12 Vlogs: Personal/Private Testimonials

The notion of extimacy is evident in a series of video works by American artist Natalie Bookchin entitled *Testament* (2009-2016)*. Testament* explores the collective portraits of the self through the sharing economy of YouTube and Vimeo. The series is comprised of three video chapters, *My Meds, Laid Off* and *I am Not, e*ach chapter comprised of a collection of video logs (vlogs),[248] gleaned from YouTube and edited into a chorus of proclamations around topics of unemployment, sexual identity and prescribed medication.[249] The work exists offline as an artwork that is experienced as a projection shown on loop and online as single-screen non-looped videos on Vimeo and YouTube. Conceptually, the artist draws on the model of a Greek Chorus to create a modern equivalent of a choir of ordinary people united in language, frustration and despair over events that have impacted their lives.[250]

**Figure 2.11**. Natalie Bookchin, *Testament* (Video, colour, sound, multiple videos), 2009-2017. Installation view.

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[247] Abidin, Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online, 11-13.

[248] Vlogs are a form of blogging where the medium is video as opposed to text. Of the vernacular video genres, the video blog (vlog) is most emblematic of participation and self-presentation on YouTube. Vlogs are similar to the text-based blogs in that they are both forms of personal commentary. However, vlogs privilege video as the central mode of communication. They are also relatively easy to produce with a webcam or phone camera, and requires basic editing skills.

[249] Video blogs or vlogs can be seen as a progression from text-based web blogs or blogs. Blogs web pages that contain newsgroup article entries, known as ‘posts,’ are displayed in reverse chronological order with the newest post listed first. In terms of style and content, blogs are a hybrid between diaries, newspapers and editorials. Postings vary in length but are generally frequent, typically once a day. Blogs are maintained by one person or a designated group of authors and are an innovation in personal publishing that has also engendered a new form of social interaction. This usually takes place through the inclusion of hyperlinks between blogs, mentions in blog posts, and comments posted in response to other bloggers.

[250] Natalie Bookchin, quoted in Bookchin and Stimson, ‘Out in Public: Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Black Stimson.’

Bookchin's mass presentation of individual stories as part of a larger collective narrative of loss, medication and oppression reveals the confluence of intimacy and anonymity, isolation and connectivity, achieved through presentations of the self through vlogs. As a vehicle for self-expression, vlogs offer an intimate portrait of producers that profiles their appearance, views and opinions. The sense of intimacy is embedded in the conversational format of the vlog itself, which is structured around a monologue delivered direct to the camera, which gives a sense of liveness and immediacy. The intimate and immediacy of vlogs draws from earlier modes of webcam culture, including personal blogging and the confessional culture of popular modes, including reality TV and talk shows. Unlike these earlier forms, vlogs are created to inspire responses and interaction that form a visual conversation thread.[251]

At the time of the production of these works, Bookchin observed the surge of vlogs as a prominent cultural form with a scholarly focus on the democratic potential of collaborative communication.[252] *Testament* was created in response to the technological optimism of the time to offer a more complicated reflection, which pointed towards the confessional nature of self-portraits on YouTube that were extremely private yet public.[253] Vlogs, like text-based blogs, can function as diaries or personal journals that focus on Tisseron's notion of extimacy in the sharing of aspects of their intimate and private lives.[254] Unlike traditional diary practices, which are cautiously guarded, vlogs and other online autobiographical forms such as 'selfies' are produced to be viewed and potentially shared by others. Bookchin's aggregation of vlogs of mass sharing of personal experiences reflects this dynamic, where the private domain is carefully and intentionally publicised and the public domain (of YouTube) is personalised.

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[251] Burgess and Green, 'The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional-Amateur Divide,' 94.

[252] Druik. 'Small Effects from Big Causes: The Dialogic Documentary Practice of Natalie Bookchin,' 25.

[253] Aksioma (Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana), 'Natalie Bookchin: Prospective Collectives: Animating the Shared Self at Proper and Improver Names. Identity in the Information Society.'

[254] Tisseron, 'Intimacy and Extimacy,' Section: Intimacy, Extimacy and Self Disclosure.'

**Figure 2.12**. Natalie Bookchin*, My Meds* (Video, colour, sound, 1 minute and 10 seconds duration), 2008. Screen grab by author.

Each chapter synchronises what April Durham calls a ‘percussive voicing of self,’ which emphasises the isolation and desire to create connection by publicly sharing personal experiences as a collective narrative. Describing these videos as ‘confessional self-portraits,’ Bookchin also suggests they point towards a gap or absence of commonality, social space and the desire to be seen and heard.[255] These underlying motivations to create connections through confessional self-presentations is a category of YouTube videos that Patricia Lange defines as ‘videos of affinity’. These videos are a subset of the much larger category of affiliation; they can be described in multiple ways that can include feelings of membership within a social network or feelings of attraction or association to people, things, or ideas.[256] Lange defines affinity on YouTube as at type of affiliation that refers to feelings of connection between people. She states:

> Videos of affinity try to establish communicative connections to people, often members of a social network…Videos of affinity attempt to maintain feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video. [257]

The process of interpellation and affinity can be seen in the polyvocality of Bookchin’s installations that use sound as an organising structure. In *My Meds,* the shortest of the video chapters, Bookchin edits excerpts of vlogs into horizontal bands with layers of sound that include moments of individual and collective narratives that are overlaid. The work begins with a single frame of a female vlogger who says, ‘So umm…without further ado I am going to introduce you to my medications.’ The last word of her sentence is spoken in unison by other vloggers. In the next frames, further horizontal bands of vloggers proceed to read a list of medications: ‘Depakote,’ ‘Prozac,’ ‘Ritalin,’ ‘Trazodone,’ ‘Xanax,’ some detailing the dosage and showing the packaging. Several medications are spoken in unison by the vloggers which suggests a commonality of illness and subsequent treatment.

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[255] Aksioma (Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana), ‘Natalie Bookchin: Prospective Collectives: Animating the Shared Self at Proper and Improver Names. Identity in the Information Society.’
[256] Lange, ‘Videos of Affinity on YouTube,’ 71.
[257] Lange, 71.

Through her editing of clips into horizontal bands of vloggers, Bookchin creates the visual image of a collective. Yet the repetition of the setting and camera also highlights the isolation of each individual – a juxtaposition that sociologist Sherry Turkle describes as being ‘alone together.’ The bodies of the vloggers visually and conceptually serve as an index for each of the vloggers and help to promote affinity between them. In the second phase of *My Meds*, a sole vlogger weeps and says, ‘I’m in the process of switching my medications,’ before she is joined by another chorus of vloggers, who are also changing their medication, reading a list of prescribed drugs. The work ends with a sequence of vloggers saying they are ‘feeling better.’ The last lines of narrative synchronise the phrase of ‘feeling better,’ reflecting the collective indexing of their live bodies in the present-focused perspective.

As Lange notes, videos of affinity have a present focus and communicative orientation that aims to transmit a feeling, or share a particular moment or state of affairs, in the video maker’s life. Affinity created through sharing common experience is evident in the thematic structure of the second chapter, *Laid Off. Laid Off* is a collation of vlogs and testimonies of ex-employees who lost their job in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. In this work numerous vlog excerpts are organised into three key parts of a collective narrative that describes the process of dismissal. The first part of the work comprises vloggers describing the day and process of getting figures, the similarity of their narratives highlighted by moments of unison that highlight the common corporate language associated with dismissal, including ‘downsized,’ ‘redundant,’ and ‘laid off.’ In the second part of the work, vloggers describe their employment history and their subsequent feelings of hurt and betrayal. In the last part of the work, the narrative shifts from recollecting the past into a present-focused perspective, as several vloggers share their hope for new jobs and a new start. The thematic structure and sound layering highlights affinity through a shared experience, constructing a form of ‘found collectivity’ and solidarity that allows for individual and collective stories to be seen and heard.[258]

**Figure 2.13.** Natalie Bookchin, *Laid Off* (Video, colour, sound, four minutes and thirty-six seconds duration), 2008. Screen grab by author.

The last chapter of the Testament Series entitled *I am Not* highlights the performativity of vlogs, which expand the trope of the avatar as a relational self-representation. This chapter comprises vlogs of males declaring whether they are homosexual or not. The work begins with a sole vlogger, who appears a thumbnail frame in the centre of the screen, and who begins speaking direct to camera, making the statement, ‘For those of you who doubt, I am straight…For those of you who don’t know, I haven’t always been straight.’ At the end of his statement, he smiles, laughs and gestures towards the camera, possibly at his revelation. When the vlogger said he ‘hasn’t always been straight,’ another screen pops up to his right of an African American male in a green shirt looking dismissively towards the left his frame, seemingly listening to the statement of the previous walker, before turning and walking away, leaving a view of his laptop on his bed. Both central frames remain on the screen at times frozen and fading, while other frames appear around them, fading in and out as each vlogger emphatically clarifies his sexual identity.

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[258] Druik. ‘Small Effects from Big Causes: The Dialogic Documentary Practice of Natalie Bookchin,’ 17.

Unlike previous chapters of *Testament*, where sound is edited to create synchronous moments of common narrative, *I am Not* creates a thread of commonality by layering excerpts that respond to the same set of social discourses. The editing of the work around central frames creates the vision of a multi-layered and connected conversation. At points in the video, the dialogue of different vloggers are juxtaposed and overlaid, revealing conflicting perspectives and positions. In other instances, the declarations seem to echo each other, creating affiliations between vloggers who declare that they are/are not gay. Some share their experiences of transitioning, such as one vlogger who states ‘I used to be gay… but then I decided it’s wrong,’ a sentiment echoed by another vlogger: ‘I didn’t have fun being gay.’ Although there are pockets of self-affirmation, the majority of the dialogue reflects a chorus of disavowal and homophobia, reflected in one of the final excerpts where a vlogger preaches against homosexuality in reference to Christianity. These multiple layers of dialogue are laced with varied level of emotion and at time pain, which is clear in one of the final excerpts when a vlogger shouts in frustration, proclaiming his sexual identity as a gay man, before stating that he is sick and tired. His impassioned address near the conclusion of the work can be seen as a response to the cacophony of disavowal, and to the trauma of being a gay man in a homophobic society.[259]

The chorus of declarations in *I am Not* reflects embodied performativity on YouTube. The discourse on performativity originates in the theory of speech acts by British philosopher John Austin, who reframed speech as a performative action. Austin challenged the view of language as being merely presentational and instead highlighted its performative force as a social action. According to Austin, words are not simply expressive but have agency to produce the action they are expressing and are thus performative. He states:

> To name the ship is to say (in appropriate circumstances) the words ‘I name’. When I say, before the registrar or altar, ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it. What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, ‘a performative’. The term performative will be used in a variety of cognate ways and constructions as the term ‘imperative is’. The name is derived of course from ‘perform’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the

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[259] Druik. ‘Small Effects from Big Causes: The Dialogic Documentary Practice of Natalie Bookchin,’ 15.

> issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action it is not normally thought of as just saying something.[260]

The declarations captured in *I Am Not*, and in the other works in the *Testament*, demonstrate the illocutionary force of language as performative utterances or speech acts that communicate experiences and identities of the self.

Austin identifies three types of speech acts that characterise performative utterances; a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. 'A locutionary act is the act of performing an utterance of 'saying something' that consists of a phonetic act of uttering noises, a phatic act of uttering certain words that form a vocabulary that conforms to a certain grammar and a rhetic act, the use of words in the definite sense and reference.'[261] The illocutionary act is the act of saying something with specific force or intention, such as asking a question or making a request.[262] Lastly, perlocutionary acts refer to the effects upon feelings, thoughts, and actions of the audience or of the speaker, either by design, intention or purpose to produce them.[263] Austin's theory of speech acts provides a useful framework for the dialogue in *I am Not* in highlighting socially constructed language spoken with intention, and the subsequent ability to affect the feelings and actions of others on YouTube.

Amidst the chorus of declarations on *I am Not* are the speech acts of vloggers who affirm their identities as gay and 'come-out' to the viewing audiences of YouTube. Coming out videos have become their own genre of vernacular video that empower sexual subjectivities.[264] De Ridder and Dhaenens note that for some youth, these videos are an opportunity to step out of 'invisibility' and receive support and networking.[265] In contemporary western societies, the phenomenon of 'coming out' verbally to selected others is a common experience of recognising and asserting identities as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer and intersex.[266] Coming-out to an immediate network is also a political act, an individual's attempt to confront the cultural and psychological heterosexism that ignores, silences and stigmatises LGBTQI identities.[267] The political nature gives weight to the mixed metaphor of ‘coming out of the closet,’ which draws both on the early twentieth century of debutante introductions to society and the metaphor of hiding ‘a skeleton in the closet,’ due to its social stigma. [268]Coming-out was a reversal of stigma, as D. Travers Scott explains:

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[260] Austin, *How to do things with words*, 6.

[261] Austin, 95.

[262] Austin, 101.

[263] Austin, 101-102.

[264] Coming out Videos are often titled and tagged to specific this communicative intention. Common titles include 'Coming out,' 'Coming out Gay,', 'Coming out Story,' 'My Coming out Story' and 'Coming Out of the Closet'. Bryan, 'Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube,' 24.

[265] De Ridder and Dhaenens, 'Coming Out as Popular Media Practice: The Politics of Queer Youth Coming Out on YouTube,' 44.

[266] These diverse identities are often referred to in acronym form 'LGBTQI.' Yet, while these categories are used globally, they may have more localised inflections of meaning. Further, these categories do not reflect the cultural diversity of gender and sexual identities that have no equivalent English terms or definitions. For example, the Pacific region has a range of well-established gender and sexual identities that could be defined as broadly 'homosexual' or 'transgender.' However, in some Pacific nations, these individuals fulfilled cultural and ritual roles and were identified using specific cultural terms, as for the third-gendered individuals of Sāmoa who are identified as 'fa'afafine,' biological males who embody both male and female gender traits.

267 Heterosexism is a diverse set of practices where the homosexual and heterosexual binary is active and heterosexuality is privileged. This can be divided this into cultural herterosexism to define institutional, religious and legal manifestations and psychological heterosexism to reflect attitudinal and behavioural manifestations. Speer and Potter, 'The Management of Heterosexist Talk: Conversational Resources and Prejudiced Claims,' 543.

> The closet was associated with the later, liberation-era gay politics emerging in the mid-1960s. Here, the source metaphor was a ‘skeleton in the closet’, a secret that is hidden due to its social stigma. In refuting the social condemnation of sexual and gender minorities, one refused to play by this logic. Instead of being ashamed of the skeleton, one took pride in it. The skeleton was visibly celebrated in public, rather than hidden away in a closet, because it was hiding that gave the closet its power to define the skeleton as deviant.[269]

Coming out on YouTube and other social networks and the internet at large has been described by several queer scholars and commentators as the ‘Digital Closet.’[270] These rhetorical acts of coming out on YouTube are captured in the excerpts of only a few vloggers in Bookchin’s work, one of whom gushingly declares ‘I love being Gay.’ While these few excerpts may not be the first time the vloggers are ‘coming out,’ they are representative of the broader practice of public self-representations online as extimate avatars that are both public and personal.[271]

The process of ‘coming-out,’ as captured in Bookchin’s video work, reflects the performative nature of speech acts for the vlogger (speaker) and the audience (hearer). Coming out Videos as a means and mode of identity construction can be considered a performative ‘speech act.’ A.C. Liang argues:

> Coming out is therefore a speech act that not only describes a state of affairs, namely the speaker’s gayness, but also brings those affairs, a new gay self, into being. By presenting a gay self, an individual alters social reality by creating a community of listeners and thereby establishing the beginners of a new gay-aware culture. Coming out is, in this respect, a performative utterance (Austin 1962) that can be seen as revolutionary.[272]

In the few instances where vloggers ‘come-out’ as being gay, they are using both language and the medium of video to create a new facet of their self-identity online – their extimate avatar. In addition to this and by the networked condition of YouTube, these speech acts also alter the reality of others online, creating a community of ‘listeners’ and potential vloggers. Conversely, as evident in Bookchin’s work, it also can create a community amongst those who ‘come-out’ to create a self-identity based on disavowal. This reflects what Deborah Chirrey states is an interactivity between the vlogger and the listeners:

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[268] In her discussion of closet rhetoric, Danielle Bobker acknowledges that while most critics appreciate how coming out has empowered gay and lesbian movements, some queer scholars including Judith Butler, Eve Kosowfsky Sedgwick and Michael Warner have cautioned its simplistic binary and critiqued the figure of the closet as a concrete spatiality that reinforces the idea of sexual identities as fixed and transparent. Bobker, ‘Coming Out: Closet Rhetoric and Media Publics,’ 52.

[269] Scott, ‘Coming out of the closet’ – examining a metaphor,’ 4.

[270] Coming out online was also a form of activism, as in the example of the campaign ‘coming out on the internet’ in Turkey in 2001. Serkan Gorkemli, ‘“Coming Out of the Internet”: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet as a “Digital Closet” in Turkey,’ 63.

[271] Bryan. ‘Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube,’ 19–33.

[272] Liang, ‘Coherence in Coming-Out Stories.’ 293.

> It not only involves the speaker in an act but it may also have the force of causing the listener to change his or her perspective on the world in order to accommodate this new information.[273]

As an artwork displayed to audiences online and in gallery contexts, *I am Not* extends the performativity of the vloggers and the multiple listeners (audiences) of the work. The extension of performativity of *Testament* in the gallery is emblematic of the perlocutive nature of vlogging, bedroom musical performances and the many other forms of self-presentations on YouTube. Through the chapters of *Testament*, Bookchin creates a modern day take on the chorus of Greek tragedies who speak collectively, offering reflection and commentary on the events of the drama. Whilst the chapters feature very specific commentary on the events that occur off-screen (with actors who are absent), they also through communicate the codified performance of the self. Bookchin likens the chorus of vloggers to August Wilhelm Schlegal's definition of the chorus as the 'common mind of the nation' and thus the 'ideal spectator.'[274] Within the prosumer culture of YouTube, Bookchin's works present a choir of 'ideal prosumers' sharing commentary and extending their performativity to the listeners watching in the gallery and online.

The online platform YouTube has provided new ways to produce, broadcast and distribute extimate avatars through the medium of video. As explored in this chapter, the cultural practice of creating and distributing vernacular video on YouTube extends the trope of the avatar to include mediums such as vlogs, remakes and amateur performances, where users produce themselves as content. By appropriating, editing and presenting these works in new recombinant forms, the artists of this chapter splice across the archive of YouTube. In doing so, their works give new insights and critical emphasis to the ways in which the trope of the extimate avatar and the concept of extimacy enables users to broadcast themselves, their feelings and singing performances to an unknown online audience. The dynamics of YouTube and its participatory culture was embraced by artist such as Laric and Lilo, whose art works demonstrate their engagement and interaction on the platform itself. Lilo's 'collaborative' remixes and Laric's display of user-created 'versions' of his works are indicative of the ways in which contemporary artists of the decade beginning in 2007 were embracing the social and cultural dynamics of YouTube. This chapter also addressed artists whose practices take a sociological splice across YouTube in the work of Siegel and Bookchin. Siegel's exploration of the viral remake video with her rhythmic editing rendered visible the shifting nature of notions of private and public and the construction of gender in performance video. The opening up of private space for public consumption was echoed by the use of vlogging as an extimate form of self-disclosure in the work of Bookchin. Through her chorus of vloggers, Bookchin reveals how extimacy enables forms of confessional sharing as a vehicle for validation and affinity. Collectively, these works reflect the diversity of video production in this decade and how the creation, viewing and sharing of video enabled extimate experiences of identities.

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[273] Chirrey, '"I Hereby Come Out": What Sort of Speech Act is Coming Out?' 30.
[274] Von Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 69-70.

## 3. Second Life: the artist as avatar

This chapter examines the extimate relationship between the artist and the avatar in works made in virtual world of Second Life. In these works, the artists do not simply employ an avatar but extend their subjectivity into their avatar. Far from a simple conduit for the artist, the avatars in the context of virtual worlds are distinct identities in their own right. Together, the artist and avatar demonstrate a constant loop of agency, subjectivity and cognition. This relationship will be unpacked further, drawing on sociological and phenomenological notions of the body that take into consideration the experience of the artist body and the avatar body in their respective environments. To contextualise works made in Second Life, this chapter begins by defining virtual reality as an image space, and examines the emergence of the figure of the visual cyborg, and later the avatar, that offered an entry into new (image) spaces. To demonstrate the role of artists in shaping virtual reality and the trope of the avatar, this chapter uses pioneering works of the 1990s by artists such as Diane Gromala, Yacov Sharir and Victoria Vesna. Discussions of these works provide a necessary foundation to frame the later development of the trope of the avatar as an embodied form of extimacy, through contemporary art works made in Second Life, the open-form virtual world. This chapter will examine the work of contemporary artists who create art works through and as their avatars in Second Life. It will illustrate how Second Life and its potential allowed artists such as Eva and Franco Mattes to extend their contemporary practices into a new virtual world to create works 'in-world' and in real life. A major focus of this chapter is the work of Cao Fei and her Second Life avatar China Tracey that model the doubly embodied extimate relationship between the artist and avatar. In previous chapters the term 'extimate avatar' is applied to specifics forms of visual self-representation; however, in this chapter the term 'avatar' is used as it would be in the context of Second Life to refer to the graphic self-representations of users. Through a close analysis of artists and their avatars, this chapter will draw on psychoanalytic and phenomenological framings of the body to illustrate the work of artists whose avatars are extimate and embodied, unique parts of their identity and practice

### 3.1 Second Life

Second Life was launched in 2003 by Linden Lab in California as an internet community. Participants on Second Life*,* known as 'residents,' create avatars, and are able to interact with objects and other avatars 'in-world,' known colloquially as 'the grid'. As an open platform, activities varied and typically involved individual exploration, socialization, group activities and building within the virtual world. Second Life had no specific parameters or goals but functioned as an open-ended digital platform that operates in parallel with the physical domain. As a parallel world, Second Life persisted seamlessly and its in-world clock known as 'SLT' (Second Life Time), which is the equivalent to Pacific Standard Time, ran continuously in real time.[275] Second Life also has its own form of virtual currency, known as 'Linden Dollars,' enabling residents to engage in a plethora of commercial activities, including shopping, trading and acquiring virtual property. Linden Dollars can also be traded for US dollars on LineX, the official virtual exchange of Second Life run by Linden Lab. In 2013, its tenth year of operation, Linden Lab reported that 36 million accounts had been created and released an infographic tracking its progress (Figure 3.1).

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[275] Ensslin, 'Linden Lab's Second Life,' 48-49.

**Figure 3.1.** Second Life, Second Life Infographic.

To access Second Life, a prospective user must download client software, create a personal account, and create an avatar to begin their life as a resident.[276] New residents can choose from a set of default avatars (women, men, objects and animals) using the ‘Avatar Picker’ provided by Linden Lab free of charge. Default avatars are fully customisable to allow users to individuate their avatars through a range of options available in the ‘Appearance’ menu.[277] While there are ‘freebie’ options available to new residents, they can also purchase virtual items sold by fellow residents at the Second

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[276] It is free to create a *Second Life* account and to use the world however there is a paid premium membership option which provides the user with a weekly stipend of L$300 and an increased level of technical support. There are also corporate membership options, land maintenance options, land purchase options with Value Added Tax added where applicable. Full pricing list available via the website; Second Life, ‘Second Life Pricing List:

[277] New members to second life also termed ‘newbies’ are identifiable for their use of the default avatars and customisations. Veteran residents have learned to create more realistic looking avatars that are more realistic looking with details such as hair, body shapes, body decorations and other virtual items. See Gottschalk, ‘The Presentation of Avatars in Second Life: Self and Interaction in Social Virtual Spaces,’ 501-25.

Life Marketplace. As the primary interface between the user and Second Life, the avatar is discussed by Simon Gottschalk in his article *Self and Interactions in Social Virtual Spaces*, which describes the elements of the avatar as 'sign vehicles.' The communicative nature of avatars and the functional effects of customisation promotes ongoing avatar construction by residents, with some spending days and a lot of Linden dollars creating an avatar. Gottschalk notes:

> Second Life, therefore, our digital-physical appearance is no longer determined by genetic baggage or shaped by habit, age, and other natural biological processes. On the contrary, since we continuously customise every inch or pixel of our avatar, we are now fully responsible for the virtual self we present to others.[278]

The outward facing nature of avatars as public entities in Second Life retains much of the same conceptual underpinning as the function of avatars in the multi-user domains of the 1990s.

Residents of Second Life interact with each other through avatars that can take any form, including inanimate objects, plants, animals or a human body that deviates from or resembles their real-world identity.[279] Avatars interact directly or indirectly with the construction of the virtual world and thus are creators of the Second Life virtual world. As a form of virtual embodiment, avatars in Second Life are mostly fashioned to address aesthetic, interpersonal, communicative, material and emotional objectives of the human user, and are strongly linked to self-image.[280] There are no real-world limitations on avatars who can navigate Second Life by accessing maps, teleportation or walking or flying across different Second Life regions or 'sims.' Avatars also contribute to the collective experience of other residents, as it is possible to hear what avatars are saying (audibly or in written form) within thirty virtual meters of each other. Other forms of avatar-to-avatar communication include in-world messaging and nonverbal gestures, enacted by animated gestures such as waving or blowing kisses, or facial gestures such as frowning, stored in the personalised 'Inventory.'[281]

### 3.2 Virtual reality and artistic practice

Before examining the figure of the avatar in contemporary art, it is useful to define the field of virtual reality, which constitutes a wide variety of applications and technologies that represent a fundamental shift in the collective perception of realities and how they constructed and defined. Early definitions of virtual reality encompass both the hardware and technologies (the glasses and goggles), often used to create navigable virtual environments and mediated human experiences of presence or telepresence. [282] In 1993, Jonathan Steur offers a definition of virtual reality as 'a real or simulated environment where a perceiver experiences telepresence.'[283] Ken Piementel and Kein Teixeira in *Virtual Reality: Through the Looking Glass* also add to this definition in highlighting immersion – being surrounded by an environment – as one of the defining characteristics of virtual reality. Other academics highlight the navigable possibilities of virtual reality in terms of redefining perspective and creating an entirely new space.[284] Howard Rheingold provides a summary of the ontology of virtual reality in terms of three interdependent aspects:

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[278] Gottschalk, 'The Presentation of Avatars in Second Life: Self and Interaction in Social Virtual Spaces,' 511.

[279] Furber, 'Ethics and Virtual Worlds Second life as a Case Study,' 6.

[280] Ensslin, 'Linden Lab's Second Life', 48-49.

[281] In Second Life, the Inventory is the collection of all the stored Second Life items that a resident owns or has access to. It does not include items actively placed within the 3D world, but it does include items attached to one's avatar.

[282] Steur, 'Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence,' 37.

[283] Steur, 37-38.

> One is immersion, being surrounded by a 3D world; another one is the ability to walk around in that world, choose your own point of view; and the third axis is manipulation, being able to reach in and manipulate it.[285]

Michael Heim identifies seven driving concepts of virtual reality; simulation, interaction, artificiality, immersion, telepresence, full body immersion and network communication.[286]

More recent definitions of twenty-first century computing reflects the advances in virtual technologies and its increasingly visual and immersive qualities experienced in real time. Elizabeth Groszoffers the following definition of virtual reality as ‘computer-generated and [computer]-fed worlds that simulate key elements of “real space” or at least its dominant representations – for example, its dimensionality, its relations of resemblance and contiguity-acting as a partial homology for a “real space” within which it is located.’[287] Oliver Grau highlights the visual nature of three-dimensional computer-generated worlds as the ‘image space.’ Grau’s description of the image space acknowledges the impact of computing technologies on the creation and distribution of images and the possibility to ‘enter it.’[288] As Grau states, ‘The suggestive impression is one of immersing oneself in the image space, moving and interacting there in ‘real time’ and intervening creatively.’[289]

### 3.3 Entering the image space

Artistically entering the image space has a long history that predates the virtual reality of computer mediated environments. Grau argues that the essence of virtual reality has been a phenomenon in art history that can be traced back to antiquity. To support this argument, Grau creates a genealogy of artists and artworks that integrate the physical surroundings of the viewer to achieve an immersive 360 degrees image space. Beginning with wall paintings from the late Roman Republic, Grau draws on other examples, including modernist painter Claude Monet’s waterlily paintings, to highlight the illusory nature of artworks where the wall appeared to extend beyond a single plane to envelop the viewer. According to Grau, these illusory image spaces are the foundation for the evolved image spaces created through cinema and military virtual technologies, such as the Head Mounted Displays (HMD) invented in 1968, and later the invention of data gloves in 1983 that enabled a higher degree of immersion and interaction.[290] These technologies had multiple applications in medical and military training for their ability to simulate and synchronise the representation of a virtual body with the real-life experiences of the physical body. These visual and sensorimotor experiences presented a new embodied image space that held new aesthetic possibilities for artists.[291]

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[284] Piemental and Teixieira, *Virtual Reality,* 12-15.
[285] Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*, 34.
[286] Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, 109-128.
[287] Groz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, 41.
[288] Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 3.
[289] Grau, 3.
[290] In 1983, commercial data gloves were invented by Jaron Lanier, founder of VPL research, one of the first companies that developed and sold virtual reality products.

Artists who engaged almost contemporaneously with the development of virtual reality technologies assisted and contributed to the developing knowledge of virtual realities. These pioneering artists present, as Grau argues, a new type of artist who represents an intersection between art and science:

> …media artists represent a new type of artist, who not only sounds out the aesthetic potential of advanced methods of creating images and formulates new options of perception and artistic positions in this media revolution, but also specifically researchers' innovative forms of interaction and interface design, thus contributing to the development of the medium in key areas, both as artist and scientists.[292]

The role of artists in the development of virtual reality was signposted in the early 1990s by Michael Heim who posited that virtual reality would 'enhance the power of art to transform reality,' and suggested that a new type of artist was required. To harness this power, artists would need to be interdisciplinary practitioners, creating works that were experimental and drew equally on art and science. Ryszard W. Clusczcyńsk offers a commentary on artists engaging in the fields of science:

> Artists active in this field join the group of scientists who develop valuable knowledge concerning the reality and its various faces. This way works of art become part of intellectual discourse within which contemporary issues are discussed and future scenarios are designed and analysed.[293]

The central role of artists was acknowledged in the Art and Virtual Environments Programme at the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada, established in 1993. Works emerging through the programme were amongst the first to explore virtual reality as an artistic medium and acknowledged the role of artists as users of virtual reality and as interlocutors of new 'virtual' domains. In relation to the projects of Banff, Century and Bardini state:

> For the diffusion process of the set of innovations constitutive of VR [virtual reality], the artist is a multi-faceted kind of user, re-shaping the medium towards a second-order user, that is, spectators and audiences. This in-betweenness of the artist (between designers and audiences) creates a particular representative situation: at the interface between design and use, the artist may very well be at the strategic locus to represent each side to the other. In this perspective, our project of looking at the connection between networks of design (or development) and networks of use (or diffusion) is well-served by a look at the artistic appropriation of the medium at a time when the medium is not yet stable: it combines all the possible dimensions of mediation.[294]

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[291] Doyle, 'Art and the avatar: The kritical works in SL project,' 137-153.

[292] Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 3.

[293] Kluzcyński, 'From Digital Identity to Architecture of the Nanoworld. Remarks on the Art of Victoria Vesna.' 5-9.

[294] Century and Bardini, 'Towards A Transformative Set-Up: The Art and Virtual Environments Program at the Banff Center for The Arts,' 257-259.

The role of artists as scientists and as interlocutors highlights the intermediary nature of artists who actively create interfaces for viewing, interacting, and engaging with the image space of virtual reality. Many of the virtual reality art works that emerged at this time demonstrate the crucial role of the physical body as the ground and medium for the experience.[295]

### 3.4 Entering the image space of the virtual reality through the cyborg

The ability to enter the image space of virtual reality relied heavily on the conceptual framework of the cyborg. By the 1990s, the figure of the cyborg was well established through the proliferation of fictional cyborgs in popular culture. The term cyborg is an abbreviation of the term ‘cybernetic organism,’ developed by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline of the Rockland State Hospital, New York, who introduced the term in a paper presented at a military conference on space medicine in 1960 at the height of the Space Race. The researchers proposed the term ‘cyborg’ as means to alter the bodies of astronauts to create self-regulating cybernetic-human machine systems, so they could survive the harsh environment of outer space. As the researchers note in their joint article ‘Cyborgs and Space’:

> Altering man’s bodily functions to meet the requirements of extra-terrestrial environments would be more logical than providing an earthly environment for him in space... Artifact-organism systems which would extend man’s unconscious, self-regularity controls are one possiblity.[296]

Space travel provided an ideal suite of biological challenges that catalysed scientific thinking of the ‘cyborg’ and the biological evolution of man, which was popularised due to the growing political interest in space exploration.

Visual representations of the ‘space cyborg’ and the futuristic vision of Clynes and Kline entered popular culture through print media. In July 1960, *Life Magazin*e published an illustration by Fred Freeman featuring two cyborg-astronauts part human, part-machine exploring the moon in in silver skintight space suits (Figure 3.1). The cyborgs ‘breathe’ through artificial lungs and communicate through radios activated by voice nerves. The red vein-like tubing on their belts infuses chemicals to control their blood pressure, pulse, and body temperature and radiation tolerance.[297] The illustration, while clearly exhibiting artistic license and drawing from science fiction, also reflects the technical proposal of Clynes and Kline’s research, signalling the cyborg as a figure of both the imagination and of reality.[298] Similar to cyborgs in the exploration of space, the figure of the cyborg is presented in the context of this artwork as the medium to explore another previously unexplored territory, virtual reality.

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[295] Kline, ‘Where Are the Cyborgs in Cybernetics?’ 341.

[296] Clynes and Kline, ‘Cyborgs and Space,’ 26.

[297] Kline, ‘Where Are the Cyborgs in Cybernetics?,’ 341.

[298] Kline notes that the editor received a letter from a self-identified technologist that he was shocked by the proposal to manufacture ‘Cyborgs’ and described them as ‘artificially de-humanized, mechanized monsters.’ The editor reassured him and other readers that the Cyborgs would be human with only some organs altered by mechanical devices. The editor also suggested that upon returning to earth such devices would be removed and their bodies returned to normal functioning. Kline, *The Cybernetic Moment: Or Why We Call Our Age the Information Age*, 173.

**Figure 3.2.** Fred Freeman, Illustration of the Cyborg, *Time Magazine,* July 1960.

By the 1990s the techno-cultural figure of the cyborg had been explored in art, literature, film and as the subject of scientific and critical texts. Donna Haraway, in her seminal text *Cyborg Manifesto*, acknowledged the cyborg as a metaphorical and literal figure of the twentieth century.

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism – in short, cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation.[299]

Haraway, alongside other posthuman theorists, argued for a much broader definition of the term ‘cyborg’ that encompassed literal merging human and machine and the temporary engagement of humans with cybernetic circuits. Katherine Hayles championed such a reading in her seminal text, *How We Became Posthuman*.

> Cyborgs actually exist. About 10 percent of the current US Population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skins. A much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the

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[299] Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto: SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIALIST-FEMINISM IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY,’ 7.

> computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided fiber-optic microscopy during an operation, and the adolescent game player in the local video-game arcade.[300]

For New media scholar Kathy Cleland 'real life cyborgs' includes prosthesis and everyday interactions with cybernetic technologies that make up personal, social, economic, political and technological selves.[301] Furthermore, Cleland suggests that the 'real life cyborgs' exist side by side with the fictional cyborgs, creating a complex web of cross-coded significations. This emerging cross-coded signification of the body and cyborg is exemplified in early virtual reality artworks in the 1990s.[302]

**Figure 3.3.** Yacov Sharir and Diane Gromala, *Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies* (Virtual reality project, head mounted display, video, sound), 1994. Installation views.

### 3.5 Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies – an early cyborg case study

*Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies* (1995) by visual artist Diane Gromala and choreographer Yacov Shahir is a virtual performance that explored embodiment in virtual reality (Figure 3.2).[303] In this work choreographer Shahir dons a head-mounted display (HMD) and data glove to interact in real time with a 3-D computer generated environment of text and image created by architect Marcos Novack. The environment was a virtual human body constructed from an MRI of Gromala's body – sternum, ribs, kidney, lungs, heart, spine and pelvis. The virtual body was of an enormous scale and in a cyclical state of decay and regeneration, depending on the navigational movements of Sharir and audience members who chose to explore the virtual environment through additional HMD. Simultaneously, video images of Sharir's physical body were also projected into the virtual body, creating the experience of being what Kathy Cleland describes as being 'doubly embodied.'[304] Sharir comments on this duality:

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[300] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 115.

[301] Cleland, 'Prosthetic Bodies and Virtual Cyborgs,' 78-79.

[302] Cleland, 78-79.

[303] Through 1991-1993, the Canadian government supported the residency programme which was designed to enable artists to have access to emergent virtual reality technologies with the support of computer scientists who wrote early VR programmes. In total, nine projects were supported through the residency including Perry Hoberman's *Barcode Hotel*, Ron Kuivila's *Virtual Reality on 5 Dollars a Day*, Yacov Sharir and Diane Gromala's *Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies*, Marcos Novak's *Virtual Worlds* and Toni Dove and Michael Mackenzie's *Archaeology of the Mother Tongue*.

> When I experienced the entrance into a computerized simulated virtual world, I am able to reference or 'see' my digitized body within the simulation. Simultaneously I sense my existence in the physical world…The sensation of disembodiment cannot be disconnected from the sensation of embodiment; that is, I feel the physicality, the groundedness of gravity simultaneously with the sense of immersion and altered abilities, such as the ability to 'fly' through simulation.[305]

Sharir's comments allude to the duality of embodiment in his virtual performance whereby his virtual body was connected to and not separate from the experiences of his physical body. As an early virtual performance work, this marks an important contrast to escapist notions of virtual reality as a disembodied escape from the physical body. Here the sense of embodiment, and indeed the focus of the performance, is not the isolated virtual body but rather its interrelatedness to Sharir's physical body.

In the installation, the physical body is presented as the medium through which the relationship between the real and virtual space is experienced.[306] Sharir's physical and virtual body countered the notion of corporeal absence in virtual reality, as noted by William Bogard:

> The absence that is at stake in virtual systems is not only that of the machine, but of the operator too (the person in this space, at this time, plugged into the machine.) The technology that disappears is the whole human-machine connection, which gives way to the disembodied traveller, the astral projectionist, the 'interface, data cowboy' in cyberspace.[307]

Sharir's body strapped with prosthetic technologies and the synchronicity of his physical and virtual movements challenge the notion of corporeal absence. For Sharir the simultaneous nature of his body offered a new experience of movement, as he comments:

> …as a dancer in two worlds – the simulation and the physical world – I experience movements in a new way. But in addition, my dance, my actions, initiate cause-and-effect relationships in all worlds, affecting movement-by-movement what happens in the simulation and the physical realm. Because I can also dance with video-grabs of myself in the simulation, I experience a kind of mirror effect.[308]

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[304] Cleland, 'Prosthetic Bodies and Virtual Cyborgs,' 84.

[305] Gromala and Sharir. 'Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies,' 49–51.

[306] For the audience, the artwork offered the viewing public an opportunity to watch someone else navigate through a virtual world and to experience what they see, as they were seeing it.

[307] The phrase 'interface, data cowboy' is taken from William Gibson's 1984 novel, *The Neuromancer*. Bogard, *The Simulation of Surveillance*, 37.

[308] Gromala and Sharir, 'Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies,' 50.

Sharir's comments suggest these combined factors offer a new way of creating artworks. However, from an audience perspective, it also modelled new experiences of the body as being simultaneously tangible and intangible and present in physical and virtual space.

Similar to Sharir's, Gromala's virtual body operates as an index of her physical body, which for the artist is a reminder of the 'real body attached to so-called experiences of disembodiment.'[309] In the installation, Gromala's internal body is transformed into a large-scale virtual environment using x-rays and MRI scans of the artist and it is wrapped in text. This environment was influenced by the artist's interests in the creative and experiential nature of her collection of scientific and medical images of her body. In relation to medical imaging, Gromala insists she is both the 'subject' and 'object' of this specific medical discourse:

> The image of bone and viscera, fluid and sound, movement and depth, for example, are at once considered to be-objective-representations of my body, yet, at the same time, they bear a mesmerizing spectral and sensuous quality. Here my body, through their tools, is enhanced as a site through which the social, political, economic, and technological forces meet, often with very real tangible effect. Here I become the cyborg, both theoretically, and as a result of the way technology alters my material being.[310]

Gromala's comments present another manifestation of the cyborg that visually differs from the cyborg of Sharir's body with its prosthetic technologies. In contrast, Gromala's cyborg reframes the objective medical images of her body as part of the technologically mediated experience of her physical body. Through reclaiming these images as part of her body, she alludes to a phenomenological understanding of the body that extends beyond the skin and encompasses the lived experience of the body. As she comments, '…it was my effort to re-appropriate, reinhabit, reclaim and reconstitute some of these fragmentary representations of my body.' [311] The relationship to the artist's living body was also simulated in the continuous motion of the virtual body that undulated as if breathing. By using her own body as the virtual environment, Gromala presents a virtual body that is both a form of representation and a site that can be inhabited.

### 3.6 Entering the shared image space of cyberspace through the avatar

The evolution of virtual image spaces through technological advancements and commercialisation of the internet created a new spatial realm of cyberspace. Cyberspace as a cognitive and social space required a new visual figure, the avatar, through which to mediate and navigate. Art historian Kathy Cleland frames the avatar in relation to the cyborg, describing the avatar as a 'virtual cyborg – a virtual prosthesis that can occupy the online domain of cyberspace.'[312] Hayles describes the avatar as a 'self-avatar assemblage,' whereby the interactive digital screen operates as a portal, allowing the body to be virtually re-presented and re-embodied in the digital realm.[313] The significance of the interactive screen in the construction of new subjectivities and identity is further emphasised by Scott Bukatman, who describes human-computer assemblages as a form of '"terminal identity" – an unmistakably doubled articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen.'[314]

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[309] Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation,* 23-54.

[310] Gromala and Sharir, 'Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies,' 50.

[311] Gromala and Sharir, 50.

[312] Like the cyborg, the virtual avatar is a techno-cultural figure represented in science fiction, film and popular culture as an intermediary figure between the physical and digital.

Avatars were popularised in shared virtual spaces of Multi User Domains or (MUDs).[315] MUDs were a form of virtual role-playing game that began as text-based networks that evolved from Dungeon and Dragons, the fantasy table-top role-playing game that was first published in 1974.[316] Similar to the table-top version, its online re-interpretation remained a collaborative adventure within a fantasy setting, with each user building characters and navigating a maze that is presented to them as written text. While there were many variations, MUDSs are largely grouped around two types: those structured around game play, where interaction is primarily goal oriented, and social MUDs that had an open-ended structure designed for social interaction with other users. In Object-oriented MUDs (MOOs), users could build characters and create objects that contribute to the overall virtual environment they were experiencing. Across all forms of MUDs, the avatar functioned as a 'prosumer,' both producer and consumer of the virtual environment and a new form of collaboratively written literature.[317]

Sociologist Sherry Turkle's participant-based research of identity in MUDs revealed how avatars were becoming 'objects-to think with' in relation to identity in a postmodern context.[318] Individual accounts reflected the liberating potential of anonymity in MUDs for expressing unexplored parts of themselves that cannot manifest fully in real life. As one participant comments:

> I'm not one thing, I'm many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world. So even though I play more than oneself in MUDs, I feel more like myself when I'm MUDding.[319]

Turkle proposed that this form of identity play brought forth a set of ideas associated with 1970s postmodernism, specifically the concept of the multiplicity and fractured identity.[320] Within MUDs, avatars were referred to as one's personae taken from the Latin verb *per sonae* which means 'to sound through' an actor's mask. The theatrical reference to masks is fitting for MUDs as an individual can create multiple personae, typically specifying gender and other physical and psychological attributes. According to Turkle, identity play was a central feature of MUDs, and the ongoing process of constructing a personae a key activity of being online. Initially, personae were text-based and presented live as public self-presentations that could be read by other users of the MUDs. As Turkle notes, identity MUDs are intersubjective, as users are ‘authors not only of their text but of themselves, constructing selves through social interaction.’[321]

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[313] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 80-81.
[314] Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, 9.
[315] MUDS were also referred to as Multi User Dimensions and Multi User Dungeons.
[316] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 11.Dungeons and Dragons was originally designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneonn.
[317] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 11-12.
[318] Turkle, 185.
[319] Turkle, 185.
[320] Turkle, 178.

Avatars as visual forms evolved with the development of graphical multi-user domains (graphic MUD) introduced in 1995. Graphic MUDs transformed the tacit text-based environments into fully rendered visual forms and objects. The technological advances of Graphic MUDs enabled avatars to be created as images, allowing previously invisible aspects of identity such as race and ethnicity to be seen.[322] Engagement within Graphic MUDs also introduced a new form of identity play in the creation and customization of avatars as images. The level of physiological and emotional investment in creating avatars developed a new cultural practice of representing the self as a visual avatar. Furthermore, in a similar way to how text-based MUDs allowed users to watch text as live chat, Graphic MUDs allowed users to engage with their own image as avatars.[323]

Avatars as a form of performed and constructed visual and textual identities are a form of extimacy, an externalised form of the self. As the mode of operation, experience and outward representation, the avatar externalises the internal feelings and intentions of a user behind a computer. Pávon-Cúeller, in his explanation of Lacan’s concept of ‘extimacy,’ uses the analogy of the Mobius strip to describe the externalisation of internal life through the assimilation of interiority with exteriority. A Mobius strip cannot be oriented to one point and its twisted loop form offers a view of both inside and outside, not as separate entities but one merging into the other. Following the form of the Mobius strip, avatars are extimate objects that exist in a continuum between the inside and the outside, an identity between the ‘inner world’ and the ‘physical outer world.’[324] In the context of MUDs and later virtual worlds, the notion of intimacy in an online context manifests as a radical externalisation of the self-as-avatar.

### 3.7 Avatars and augmented space: *Bodies Inc,* Victoria Vesna

Avatars as a form of extimacy is reflected in several art installations by Victoria Vesna that explored ideas of the intersection between bodies, communication technologies and extended identities. In *Virtual Concrete* (1995), she challenged the divisions of the ‘real’ from the ‘virtual’ in one of the first installations to combine the physical space of the gallery with the virtual spaces of the internet (Figure 3.3). The work was inspired by Northridge Los Angeles earthquake in 1994 and the confluence of virtual and concrete experiences of the natural disaster. Vesna notes, ‘residents saw first-hand and remote television audiences alike were horrified as freeways collapsed into large pieces of concrete within seconds.'[325] At the same time, modes of communication became virtual as the Internet and cell phones became the primary connections to the real world, particularly where wire lines had been damaged. The installation draws a material connection between these two phenomena in the use of silicon as a foundation element in concrete, which represents the physical world and is in the computer chips that provide the portal to the virtual world.[326] Silicon becomes a metaphor for a new spatial reality defined by a fluidity between the virtual and physical realms.

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[321] Turkle, ‘Multiple Subjectivity and Virtual Community at the End of the Freudian Century,’ 84.
[322] Nakamura, *CyberTypes,* 33.
[323] The notion of the avatar as image was solidified in the development of virtual worlds or multi-user virtual environments (MUVE) and the adoption of the industry-wide standard ‘Virtual Reality Modelling Language’ (VRML) for creating virtual worlds. Virtual worlds were defined by three-dimensional graphics, open-ended socialisation and the introduction of user-created content. The high degree of co-creation in virtual worlds reflected a paradigm shift from prescribed and pre-created virtual settings to online environments to which participants contributed content, changed and built in real time. The emphasis of virtual worlds as being open-ended, non-game based social three-dimensional spaces provided an alternative setting for a range of activities and cultural practices.
[324] Pavón-Cuéllar, ‘Extimacy,’ 661-664.

The installation consisted of a concrete path made of six three-ft slabs covered with large electrostatic (digital) prints of parts of a male and female body covered with silicone implants and computer chip boards and light sensors that triggered a voice over in the gallery. The installation also featured a computer connected to the Internet via CU-SeeME, an early form of video conferencing.[327] Live footage of the installation was shown on a dedicated website. The website was also included in the installation on a monitor.

**Figure 3.4.** Victoria Vesna, *Virtual Concrete* (Concrete, computer monitor, video feed, sound), 1995. Installation views.

In the installation virtual reality was not confined to the computer screen as Vesna translated previously immaterial online content into three-dimensional objects and sound. The path of concrete slabs in the gallery, with superimposed images of male and female body parts covered in silicon chips, also had erotically charged text over the top of the images. The texts were names of sex chat rooms recorded by the artist during her exploration of chat rooms and encountering sites that housed 9,000 rooms dedicated to sex chats.[328] As visitors walked in the installation, their shadows triggered the audio component that announced the chatroom 'destinations' and also active random cycling sounds that included mention of habeas corpus. For Vesna, the physical triggers were used to provide 'proof of corporeal presence' in the installation and beyond, through the viewers accessing the installation via the CU-SeeMe platform.[329]

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[325] Vesna, 'Installation and Telepresence Works.' 18

[326] Vesna, *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, 9.

[327] CU-SeeME is a videoconference application developed at Cornell University in 1992 and introduced to the public in 1993.

The participatory nature of the work, which occurred in the gallery and online, disrupted traditional gallery spectatorship and reconceived the audience as an active social network of participants and viewers.[330] In the gallery, the audience were primarily participants within the artwork where their bodies were used to activate elements such as sound, or to read and decipher text. On the concrete slabs, Vesna intentionally printed the text small so that the audience had to bend over or crawl on the concrete in order to read it.[331] Online, via the CU-SeeMe platform, the experience, while participatory in its software design, was different from the installation as it was primarily a viewing experience. It is worth noting that viewers online were not in any single location but were dispersed across multiple locations.[332] For Vesna, the prioritisation of online viewers rather than gallery-based viewers was an attempt to question the 'real' art experience, when the primary audience were removed from the art being viewed.[333] The passive and active participation of audiences on both sides created a social network that spanned both real and virtual spaces.

Social aspects of the internet, including the ability to create content, was later incorporated into the installation. Using the website that hosted the UC-SeeMe platform, Vesna added the possibility for online audiences to create an imaginary body. A simple CGI questionnaire, entitled 'The Body Construction Order Form,' was added to the website, which encouraged visitors to construct a body, to name it and assign a gender and offer a description of what the body meant to them (see Figure 3.4). Within a two-week period, there was over a thousand bodies produced via the website and the artist received several follow-up requests about the orders. This form of online body construction echoed the popular creation of avatars occurring across Multi-user domains, and reflects the expectation of many of the users to 'see' the bodies that they had 'ordered.'

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[328] The artist originally intended to lurk in chat rooms and randomly capture snips of conversation but decided the names were more seductive than the conversations occurring within them. One site had 9,000 rooms including Sherrv arid Bliss; Rods Annex; The Kinky Friends of Latex-Loving Laura; Wife-Watchers Special; Trial-Fuck (for Beginners); Rick's American Bar; As Time Goes By; sweet sweet bedroom of sex; The Dark Side Desert Lounge; Aimee's Ladies. Vesna, 'Installation and Telepresence Works.'

[329] Vesna, 'Installation and Telepresence Works.' 18-19.

[330] Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 39.

[331] Vesna, *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, 9.

[332] Vesna notes that one of the most successful sites was at the University of Hawaii as it was not crowded, enabling an uninterrupted signal. Vesna, 'Installation and Telepresence Works.'

[333] Vesna, *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, 8

**Figure 3.5.** Victoria Vesna, *Virtual Concrete* (Digital Body Construction Order Form), 1995. Screenshot.

In response to the demand to ‘see’ imaginary bodies as graphical representations in *Virtual Concrete*, Vesna created a secondary project *Bodies© INCorporated* (1996). This project took a dystopic view of creating graphic avatars as a commodity and commercial asset of a domain controlled by a fictional corporation. The work included a web platform that required participants to click through a series of legal notifications before entering the main site, where they could create their own avatar bodies and become members. The legal notifications were appropriated from the Disney Web site and were utilised by the artist as a tactic to alert participants to the legal ramifications of navigating through the internet. The main website invited visitors to create their own avatar ‘bodies’ from an assortment of body parts, which could also be assigned textures, such as wood, bronze, or glass, and sounds. Once a name was assigned to the avatar, participants also completed a questionnaire so that information could be submitted to the *Bodies© INCorporated* database.

The creation of an ‘avatar’ body enabled full participation in four virtual worlds that comprise *Bodies© INCorporated*: ‘Home, Limbo, Necropolis and Showplace. ‘Home,’ which is represented by a large computer ‘motherboard,’ had the rules and regulations of the project and enabled navigation to the full three-dimensional environment. ‘Limbo,’ which was symbolised by gyrating cubes of text, linked back to the text-based order forms. ‘Necropolis’ was devised for the deletion of bodies, where participants would need to choose a method of ‘death,’ write an obituary and construct a grave. Lastly, ‘Showplace’ was created as an online exhibition space that provided the parallel to physical exhibitions of ‘bodies’ presented in galleries and museums.[334]

Whilst avatars enabled participation in the virtual worlds of *Bodies© INCorporated*, the project also manifested into an exhibition, allowing audiences to engage with the work in physical space. For Vesna, the exhibition was an opportunity to localise the project, while also ensuring the simultaneous operation of the Internet-based project. For the exhibition in Santa Barbara Museum in 1996, Vesna invited local participants who created ‘bodies’ to the opening and projected their ‘bodies’ onto the museum ceiling. As Vesna notes:

> To my delight, they treated this as a special event, bringing their friends and families to see ‘their’ body exhibited in a privileged cultural space. Thus the audience was moved out of the background and became part of the exhibition. I realised this could be a new form of portraiture.[335]

Vesna’s comments about a new form of portraiture acknowledges avatars as form of subjectivity that is attached to their physical bodies. Jennifer Gonzalez, in discussing this work, proposes the term ‘appended subject’ to describe the understanding of an online persona being appended to a real person as an extension of a subject in the inhabited world.[336] To return to Vesna’s comments, the attendance of friends and families points to the social nature of the graphical avatar as an extension of a subject’s social networks and connections. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the creation of avatars, virtual embodiments and virtual experiences can generate both affect and attachment.[337]

Vesna’s installations *Virtual Concrete* and *Bodies Inc* were prescient for their time in pointing towards the avatar as an appended form of subjectivity that exists beyond the confines of the computer screen. The layering of technology over physical space and the recognition of avatars as appended subjects is an early example of what Lev Manovich describes as ‘augmented reality.’ The term ‘augmented reality,’ which Manovich prescribes to the twenty-first-century computing, marks a shift from virtual reality towards an augmented reality.

> Today, however, we are gradually moving into the next paradigm, one in which computing and telecommunication capacities are delivered to the mobile user. Thus, the augmented human also comes to mean augmenting the whole space in which she lives, or through which she passes.[338]

Within the context of the art gallery, Vesna’s installation creates what Manovich describes as an ‘augmented space’ where the avatar moves fluidly between virtual and physical space. Augmented space’ describes a literally ‘physical space’ overlaid with data and is utilised by Manovich to describe the techno-cultural landscape where technologies extract from and extend over and fill physical space.[339] While Manovich's notion of augmented space is firmly anchored in the twenty-first century computing, both it and Vesna's installation are prescient of a shift towards pervasive technologies and the treatment of the gallery space as 'layers of data.' The interaction between physical space and data in Vesna's work is mediated through and by the avatar as a form of extimacy.[340]

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[334] Vesna, *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, 16.
[335] Vesna, 16.
[336] Gonzales, ‘The Appended Subject. Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage*,’* 28.
[337] Moore, ‘Avatars and Robots: The Imaginary Present and the Socialities of the Inorganic,’ 48-63.
[338] Manovich, ‘The Poetics of Augmented Space,’ 225.

### 3.8 Art in Second Life

Early artistic experimentations with the avatar in the context of the gallery allowed for a critical distance to examine the avatar and its environments. The works discussed in this chapter thus far emerge from the context of virtual worlds, but they are individualised and bespoke virtual worlds that exist in isolation as artist projects. In the post-millennium decade, technological enhancements in virtual worlds increased user content creation and greater ability for users to build and shape the virtual world. These advances dramatically expanded the user-base of commercial worlds, including contemporary artists who engaged with virtual worlds as a new medium and artistic space.[341] For artists venturing into virtual worlds, such as the metaverse Second Life, as the site of production and or presentation, the figure of the avatar becomes integral to their art practice online and in the physical context of the art gallery.

Artistic production in Second Life encompasses the work of established contemporary artists (often already working in new media and performance) in real-life, the work of artists who were grassroots, and more emergent practices. As addressed in this chapter, artists working in virtual worlds were not new; however, concentrated numbers on specific platforms such as Second Life were unprecedented. The critical mass of artists on Second Life led to greater recognition of Second Life works by art galleries, contemporary art curators and mainstream art press.[342] In addition to existent museums and galleries who created virtual versions of their spaces in Second Life, others were designed and created to operate specifically in Second Life. In 2010, there were over 500 art gallery islands, which reflected a growing art market that emulated gallery operations in the real world.[343] The establishment of art infrastructure within Second Life acknowledge it as a presentation space for art works and increasingly as a space for the creation of artworks made by residents.

Several institutions promoted creative production in Second Life by supporting artists to undertake residencies in the virtual world. Australia Council was the first national funding body to fund a residency in Second Life in 2007, offering a grant of AUD$20,000 to a team of up to three artists, including a writer, to develop an interdisciplinary artwork in Second Life.[344] The residency was a significant endorsement of the artistic potential of Second Life and demonstrated an interest in artistic and curatorial experimentation in a broader range of digital and virtual practices. The residency reflected this wider positioning in its overall strategy, which required the recipients to 'harness both Second Life and 'real life' audiences, as well as develop a public exhibition for the artwork in Australia.'[345] The inaugural recipients of the residency were writer Justin Clemens, visual artist Christopher Dodds and musician/3D real-time artist Adam Nash. Through this residency, Clemens, Dodds and Nash created the real-time installation *Babelswarm* (2008) that was displayed simultaneously in Second Life and at the Lismore Regional Gallery in Australia.[346] Sector acknowledgment of Second Life as an extended creative space for established artists gave the figure of the avatar renewed significance as an active extension of the artist.

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[339] Manovich also notes that in practice these technologies are not always continuous and are prone to disruptions or weak signals that affect their ability to be continuous.

[340] Within the context of art, Manovich suggests augmented space is the next step in framing the gallery space and treating 'space as layers of data' and focusing on the interaction between physical space and data.

[341] Doyle, *Artistic Practice in Virtual Worlds*, xvi.

[342] Lichty, 'WHY ART IN VIRTUAL WORLDS? E-HAPPENINGS, RELATIONAL MILIEUX & "SECOND SCULPTURE."'

[343] Doyle, 'Art and the avatar: The kritical works in SL project,' 1.

### 3.9 Artist as avatar

Contemporary artists creating avatars through which to experience Second Life and create art works reflect a phenomenological framework for the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty insisted on the embodied nature of knowledge and posited the body as the context and site through which subjects understands the body and their environment and the relationship between them:

> We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A 'corporeal or postural schema' gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements or 'motor projects,' radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.[347]

For Merleau-Ponty the 'corporeal schema' highlights the experiential and dynamic nature of the living body in its environment.[348] Corporeal schema or body schema coordinate limbs and postures as part of an automatic system of motor functions that an individual performs unknowingly, out of habit rather than conscious choice. The recursive nature of habit allows for the malleability of body schema to extend through objects:

> The blind man's has ceased to be an object for him and it is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight…To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments.[349]

In this example, the blind man's schema has extended to incorporate his guide stick through which the man is able to move and operate in the world around him. Cleland utilises this example to highlight the possibility for body schema to extend to avatars as a form of technological prosthesis,

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[345] Austalia Council. 'Australia Arts Council Invites Artist to Get a Second Life.'

[346] Australia Council for the Arts, 'In Second Life.'

[347] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics,*, 5.

[348] Gallagher, 'Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification,' 542.

[349] Merleau-Ponty, *Phemenology of Perception*, 143.

‘our body image/schema expands to incorporate technological prosthesis as we project sensory perceptions in and through them.’[350] Indeed, the avatar, although visual, is still a sensory medium that activates our sight, sound and touch.

In examining the relationship between the artist and avatar, it is important to distinguish body schema, as the non-conscious performance of the body, and ‘body image,’ as the conscious awareness of the body. Shaun Gallagher defines body image as ‘a system of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body.’[351] This definition also refers to the intersubjective nature of body image that includes social and cultural images and the beliefs and gaze of others.[352] As Wherle proposes, the intersubjective nature of body image requires the body to be perceived as an object in time and space.[353] For Merleau-Ponty the objectification of the body occurs at the developmental stages of a child after six months, when they develop a perception of their own body by looking at the image of their body in the mirror or specular image. The mirror or specular image of the child is also shaped by their social interactions, as Merleau-Ponty notes:

> Let us begin by considering not the child’s image of his own body in the mirror but instead the image he has of others’ bodies. One notices, in effect, that he acquires the latter much more rapidly, that he distinguishes much more quickly between the other’s specular image and the reality of other’s body than he does in the case of his own body. Thus it is possible that the experience he has of the other’s specular image helps him arrive at an understanding of his own.[354]

The avatar as a mirror image is an extimate form that is inherently relational and intersubjective in nature. The concept of the avatar as mirror will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

### 3.10 Avatar as art: Eva and Franco Mattes

Contemporary artists working in Second Life as the medium and mode of their practice model a new artistic relationship with the avatar. This relationship was the subject of *Portraits* (2006-2007), a photographic series of Second Life portraits by artists Eva and Franco Mattes.[355] Beginning in 2006, the artists spent a year resident ‘in-world’ creating a body of photographic portraits through ‘consensual photo shoots.’[356] The portraits exist as immaterial and material forms to be shown in-world and as physical portraits presented in a series of exhibitions in Italy, New York and Switzerland. The body of works explores the avatar as a form of portraiture, as the duo explained in an interview:

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[350] Cleland, ‘Prosthetic Bodies and Virtual Cyborgs,’ 77.

[351] Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind,* 24.

[352] Wherle, ‘Being a body and having a body. The twofold temporality of embodied intentionality,’ 514.

[353] Wherle, 516-517.

[354] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, 125.

[355] The artists have changed their identity for over ten years. Their alternative identities include Luther Blissett, Darko Maver, Renato Posapiani and Tania Copechi, 0100101110101101.ORG. They have also embodied the Vatican, Nike and the European Union.

[356] Bryan-Wilson, ‘Eva and Franco Mattes.’

> We see Avatars as ‘self-portraits.’ Unlike most portraits, though, they are not based on the way you ‘are,’ but rather on the way you ‘want to be’… In Second Life you are forced not to be yourself, to wear an ultra-modern 3D mask. But masks are not there to hide your real identity, on the contrary they are there to show who you really are, since you can ignore social restrictions.[357]

The notion of avatars as a form of idealised self-portraiture points towards a sustained form of ‘identity play’ that emerged in the MUDs of the 1990s.[358] The artists too have exhibited a form of identity play in the different monikers they have exhibited under throughout their careers.[359]

For display in physical galleries, the artists printed their Second Life photographs as large-scale canvases and organised into thematic groups, for the exhibitions *13 Most Beautiful Avatars*, 2006*, LoL,* 2007, and *Annoying Japanese Child Dinosaur,* 2007. Each exhibition offered a carefully curated collection of photographs that highlighted the individual yet visually uniform types of ‘identity play’ occurring within Second Life. The first exhibition, *13 Most Beautiful Avatars*, focused directly on celebrity and the construction of avatars, using western notions of beauty (Figure 3.6). The following exhibition, *LoL*, was a smaller collection of five photographs and a triptych of female avatars, exhibited under the popular acronym used in online spaces as a metaphor for the cultural codes that contribute to avatar production.[360] The final exhibition, *Annoying Japanese Child Dinosaur* is a series of photographs of Japanese children avatars (Figure 3.7). The similarity between avatar representations reflects what Lisa Nakamura describes as ‘cybertypes,’ commodified images of race that reflect offline ideologies of race and racism.[361] Across the three exhibitions, there was a sense of formal uniformity in the composition of the portraits. Rather than profiling the full body form, the photographs are focused on the faces of the avatar, creating close-up images employing different camera angles and positions.

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[357] Quaranta ‘The most radical action you can do is to subvert yourself.’
[358] Turkle, Life on the Screen, 185.
[359] Quaranta, ‘The most radical action you can do is to subvert yourself.’
[360] Quaranta, ‘Life and Its Double.’
[361] Nakamura, *Cybertypes,* 5-6.

**Figure 3.6.** Eva & Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org), *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* (Digital prints on canvas 36 x 48). Installation views.

**Figure 3.7.** Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org), *Annoying Japanese Child Dinosaur,* 2007.

The first exhibition of the portrait series *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* (2006) was titled as a tribute to Andy Warhol's three-minute 26mm filmed portraits series, *13 Most Beautiful Boys* (1964) and *13 Most Beautiful Women* (1964).[362] Warhol's filmed portraits provide a useful formal precedent, as his screen tests were public images that were framed as headshots or three-quarter views. As a compilation, they can be seen as inherently social, in that they were produced as means of bringing people together around a ready-made activity of producing screen tests. The filmed portraits reflect the social worlds created around Warhol and the Factory that included local celebrities, local personalities and unknown figures.[363] Similarly, the portrait series by the Mattes can also be considered a reflection of a microcosm of Second Life, which also includes portraits of prominent community members such as Lanai Jarrico and Aimee Webber.[364]

The fluidity of these social worlds was acknowledged in the dual presentation of the exhibition 'in-world' and in physical galleries. The presentation *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* was first staged in Ars Virtura, an exhibition venue inside Second Life, that opened on 15 November 2006 in a virtual space that was an exact reconstruction of the physical space that would host the physical exhibition. The physical iteration of the exhibition was held at the Italian Academy at Columbia University, New York, and opened on 30 November 2006. On the upper floor of the exhibition was a live-feed link to the virtual iteration of the show in Second Life. Several of the avatar's creators were also documented to have visited the physical exhibition of their avatar portraits.[365]

To return to the artist's framework of the avatar as a form of self-portraiture, the artworks created by the Mattes can be understood as 'images of images' or images of representations.[366] When avatars are framed as self-portraits, they invoke the tradition of portraiture where the portrait can communicate something of the character or the sitter. Within the reality of Second Life, the avatar does not need to communicate the likeness or character of a user; rather they are a public and visual manifestations of the intentions and desires of their users.[367] The curatorial approach to the grouping of photographs reveals the artists' understanding of the avatar as a self-portrait of individual choices, social codes and expectations. This is evident in the series *13 Most Beautiful Avatars*, which highlighted the quality of 'beauty' emerging in avatar design.

> We didn't choose beauty, it was elected by people creating their own alter-egos. They build their characters matching the Western canon of beauty, when they could be whoever and whatever they wanted.[368]

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[362] *13 Most Beautiful Boys* and *13 Most Beautiful Women* was an ongoing compilation taken from the Screen Tests works, which total almost 500 filmed portraits taken over a two-year period from 1964-1966. Both compilations included local personalities and celebrities Edie Sedgwick, Lou Reed, Billy Name, and Dennis Hooper. One account of the *13 Most Beautiful Women* notes that the work consists of 14 filmed portraits and the *13 Most Beautiful Boys* consists of 42 filmed portraits.

[363] Wolf, 'Collaboration as Social Exchange: Screen Tests/A Diary by Gerard Malanga and Andy Warhol.*,* 64.

[364] Lichty, 'The Translation of Virtual Art Worlds,' 7.

[365] Lichty, 7.

[366] Cooke, 'De-Inter-Facement: 0100101110101101.Org's Portraits of "Second Life' Avatars,"' 397.

[367] Cooke, 397.

[368] Eva and Franco Mattes quoted in Cooke, 'De-Inter-Facement: 0100101110101101.Org's Portraits of 'Second Life'', 387.Avatars.' 403.

Similar to the Warhol compilations *13 Most Beautiful Portraits of Boys* and *13 Most Beautiful Portraits of Women,* the photographs reveal an engagement with the cultural constructs of beauty as promoted by the established Western beauty industry.[369]

### 3.11 Artist as flaneur

For this series, the artists take a sociological approach to Second Life created through a process they describe as 'video-game flanerie.'[370] Recalling the detached dilettante observer of nineteenth century Paris, the artists situate their flanerie firmly within the medium of (video/virtual) gaming. Video-game flanerie is likely to have evolved from the concept of the 'cyberflaneur,' a term that gained prominence in the early 1990s to describe the online behaviour of users.[371] Australian ceramicist Steven Goldgate offers an early definition of the term in his article 'The Cyberflaneur – Spaces and Places on the Internet,' originally published in *Art and Australia* and later on his website:

> I would posit that today's Flaneurs can be found in Web space. The Cyberflaneur 'strolls' through information space, taking in the virtual architecture and remaining anonymous… If the Flaneur was a 'decipherer' of urban and visual texts… then the cyberflaneur is the decipherer of Virtual Reality and Hypertexts. S/he is the voyeur of the post-information age.[372]

Framing their roles as flaneurs, the artist-duo claim anonymity and distance to their subjects, and their own avatars are largely absent. Instead, their presence is marked by the point of view of the camera and the framing of their work as their documentation, as they state, 'Actually, our works are not portraits, but rather "pictures of self-portraits."'[373]

In a later series of works, the artists re-staged a series of performances entitled 'Synthetic Performances' that were presented as machinima.[374] In this series the artists through their avatars re-enact six performance artworks from the 1960s and 1970s in Second Life, including Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* (1977), Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (1982-87) and Gilbert & George's *The Singing Sculpture* (1968). For each of the synthetic performances, the artists utilised the original performances as scores for the setting and performance 'in-world'. The possibility for spontaneous improvisation that is inherent in live performance art was not possible, as all the virtual objects, settings, behaviours and appearances were designed and coded in advance.[375] Patrick Lichty describes the works as ‘remediated performances,’ to describe the process of restaging of performance art in virtually ‘embodied media.’[376]

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[369] Quaranta, 'The most radical action you can do is to subvert yourself.'

[370] Mattes and Mattes, '13 Most Beautiful Avatars.'

[371] Alternative terms used to describe internet users' online behaviour and experiences include electronic flaneur, flaneur in cyberspace, a fast-forward flaneur, a keyboard flaneur, a net-flaneur, a virtual flaneur, an online flaneur and a postmodern flaneur.

[372] Goldate, 'The Cyberflaneur – Spaces and Places on the Internet'

[373] Eva and Franco Mattes quoted in Cooke, 'De-Inter-Facement: 0100101110101101.Org's Portraits of 'Second Life,'' 403.

[374] Machinima is the technique of making animated films in virtual 3D environments as a form of screen capture, and documentation that emerged in the 1990s through game re-play functions demonstrations. Machinima based on screen capture provides a form of documentation in recording events through a personal perspective. The camera's point of view is often the embodied view of the avatar and its corresponding viewer. As such, the focus of machinima is the avatar and its relationship to its surroundings.

[375] Mattes and Mattes, 'Nothing is real, everything is possible.'

The *Synthetic Performances*, like their original real-life versions, are reliant on the interaction of the audience, yet their staging in the virtual world of Second Life made them radically different iterations. For example, the re-enactment of *Imponderabillia* features the artists’ avatars standing in the gallery doorway naked and facing each other; however, no-one is forced to pass between their bodies as happened in the original performance (Figure 3.8).[377] Unlike the original performance where the visitor’s participation was central, the synthetic re-enactment loses the tension of the original and takes on a more voyeuristic and playful tone. In another example, the artists’ re-enactment of Chris Burden’s *Shoot* (1971), the radical violence and pain of the original performance does not exist in Second Life, nor do the real-world ramifications of shooting a person (Figure 3.9). The remediations of both performances were not simple re-enactments, rather they were re-presented in a context where issues of the body (violence, sexuality, identity) have completely different meanings. As such, the synthetic performances lose both the tension and provocative nature of their referents and become quite different performances.

**Figure 3.8:** Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org) *Re-enactment of Marina Abramovic and Ulay’s ‘Imponderabilia,’ Synthetic Performance in Second Life* (Machinima, sound, colour, 8 minutes and 44 seconds duration), 2007. Screenshot.

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[376] Lichty, ‘The Translation of Virtual Art Worlds,’ 6.

[377] Note that the primary mode for avatar mobility in Second Life is to fly.

**Figure 3.9.** Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org), *Re-enactment of Chris Burden 'Shoot, 1971' Synthetic Performance in Second Life* (Machinima, sound, colour, 1 minute and 1 second duration), 2007. Screenshot.

For the artists, *Synthetic Performances* articulated their polemical stance towards performance art and an intention to subvert its visceral immediacy. Despite their intentions to challenge performance art, the staging in Second Life proposed another kind of performance art through the virtual avatar.[378] In an interview, the artists state their dislike of performance art and reveal their intention in the series:

> We wanted to work on something at the edge between true and fake, synthetic and natural, real and virtual, direct and mediated…We chose actions that were particularly paradoxical if performed in a virtual world.[379]

The synthetic performances represent a shift of emphasis from the original performances, which were defined by a radical exploration of the artist's physical body. The synthetic performances shifted this emphasis to the virtual body of the artists, the avatars. This continued focus on the artist's body and the articulation of the body through the avatar fits within the category of 'body art.' Amelia Jones distinguishes body art from the larger category of performance art, which broadly encompasses theatrical productions that take place in front of an audience.[380] Body art emphasises the implication of the body in art works further: such works 'take place through an enactment of the artist's body, whether it be in a "performative setting" or in the privacy of the studio.'[381] Through their synthetic performances the artists model a new form of body art that encompasses the enactment of the artist's body as and through the avatar. The artists' avatars were fashioned to represent their physical likenesses and thus operated simply as extensions of the artists' bodies and functions in the new context of Second Life.[382] Their choice for realistic avatars was an extension of their practice as reflected in their comments:

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[378] Lichty, 6.
[379] Eva and Franco Mattes interview, 'Nothing is Real.'
[380] Jones, Body Art Performing the Subject, 13.
[381] Jones, 13.

> Because in our 'real life' we have always been impersonating fictitious identities, from the Vatican to Nike, from the City of Viterbo to the European Parliament. Since within virtual worlds you can be whoever and whatever, we find more interesting to be ourselves.[383]

For the artists, their avatars are part of their long-standing identity derived from their offline artistic practice. Their choice to enact their real identities demonstrates an interesting reversal of the identity play described by Turkle in the use of avatars in MUDs to explore aspects of the self that could not be expressed in real life. As a counter to the utopian possibilities of Second Life, Eva and Franco Mattes' avatars demonstrate that Virtual Worlds can also be the space in which to be present as themselves.

### 3.12 Artist as avatar: Cao Fei and China Tracy

Second Life as a space for production and presentation also allowed artists to extend their practice through the creation of avatars that had their own distinct identity. This advanced relationship between artist and avatar is exemplified in the work of artist Cao Fei and a body of work created in Second Life between 2007 and 2011. Within the discourse of contemporary Chinese art, Fei is considered part of the 'Zin Zin Ren Lei' (New New Human Beings) generation who grew up in the late 1980s, a time of intense social, economic and cultural transformation.[384] Rapid economic growth of her home city of Guangzhou and the socio-cultural context of China is reflected in the artist's use of popular culture and her exploration of the avatar in Second Life.

The artist's first exploration of the avatar as a form of contemporary identity first appeared in the series *CosPlayers* (2004), which includes an eight-minute moving image work and photographic series. The work explores the imagined identities of a group of Chinese youth engaging in 'cosplay,' dressed as anime video-game characters and behaving as their chosen avatar.[385] Cosplay, short for 'costume playing,' is a practice of re-enactment of fictional characters of anime (cartoon animation), manga (Japanese cartoons), and video gaming through props, costumes and role-playing.[386] Contemporary cosplay has its roots in role-playing in the doujinshi (amateurish magazines or manga) marketplaces in Japan in the 1970s in the roleplaying of characters from the magazine to draw public attention. By the 1990s, the subculture became popular outside Japan in many areas across Asia, including Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China.[387] Cosplay is indicative of the growing subculture amongst youth in China and the impact of new media on this generation, as Fei notes:

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[382] Creating realistic avatars contrasted with their practice offline, where they impersonate fictitious identities.

[383] Eva and Franco Mattes, 'Nothing is Real.'

[384] 'Post 1989 China' refers to the reshaping of China through economic reform following the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. The economic reforms of the late 1970s created special economic zones in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region, transforming cities such as Guangzhou into sites for unprecedented economic growth.

[385] Lamerichs, 'Embodied Characters: The Affective Process of Cosplay,' 199-230.

[386] Essentially a fan-based practice, the term kosupure first appeared in an article by Japanese game designer Noboyuki Takahasi after encountering the costuming practices of American Fans at the Los Angeles Science Fiction Worldcon in 1984.

> All COSPLAYERS are very young, with dreams in their heads, spending all their waking hours in the virtual world of video games from a very early age. Hence when they eventually grow up, they discover they are living a lifestyle frowned upon and rejected by society and family members alike. With no channels open to express their feeling and aspirations they resort to escapism and, becoming alienated and out of touch, they turn into ever more unbecoming characters. However, in that moment when they are turned into genies, chivalrous knights, fairy princesses, or geeks, the pains of reality are assuaged, even if the 'real' world they are standing on has not changed to the slightest.[388]

*Cosplayers* presents a plot from a surreal world through a montage of cosplayers dressed in metallic suits, elaborate headdresses and wielding some menacing weapons. In this work, cosplay pushes beyond its typical sites of science-fiction and comic conventions into the city of Guangzhou. The cosplayers transform Guangzhou into a virtual game as they chase each other across fields and empty urban settings, including a desolate parking garage, construction sites and an empty restaurant. The contrast between the fantastical cosplayers and their urban surroundings are heightened by the slightly odd presence of livestock and exotic animals, such as zebras and cheetahs. The moving image ends with the cosplayers at home, where they return to their ordinary lives as teenagers doing mundane activities, such as checking their cell phones, eating and taking a nap, while their parents continue watching television, sewing or cooking, undistracted by their presence.

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[387] Rahman and Wing-sun and Hei-man Cheung, 'Cosplay: Imaginative Self and Performing Identity,' 318.
[388] Cao Fei Artist Website, 'Works.'

**Figure 3.10.** Cao Fei, *Deep Breathing* from the Cosplayers Series (C-print, 75 × 100 cm), 2004.

**Figure 3.11.** Cao Fei, *A Ming at Home* from the Cosplayers Series (C-print, 75 × 100 cm), 2004.

The juxtaposition of the cosplayers against the urban settings is echoed by the contrast of their high-pace activities as heroic cosplayers against the mundane activities of their teenage lives at home. The transition between cosplayers at play as heroes and as teenagers at home creates a clear distinction between the public stage of the city and their private backstage lives at home. This theatrical distinction between front stage and backstage presents cosplay as a form of dramaturgy. Sociologist Erving Goffman in his seminal text *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* defines the 'front stage' as 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.'[389] The fixity of cosplay is evident in the tropes of combat and chase that occur in Fei's work and in the codified play that is acknowledged by the fellow players. Each individual is producing signs through dress and performance that generate an association between their bodies and the characters they are embodying.[390]

The teenager's attachment and dedication to their chosen characters is emphasised in the photographs of the teenagers in their private homes staying in character. The private settings of the teenagers represent a spatial and conceptual break that evokes Goffman's notion of 'backstage'. For Goffman the backstage is relative to the performance space but is located separately from it, where audiences are not expected to be present. The domestic spaces of the kitchens and lounges of the teenagers in Fei's works become the 'backstage' of cosplay, which takes place in the 'front stage' of the city. According to Goffman, when someone is backstage preparatory and evaluative tasks can be undertaken and performances and costumes can be tweaked, changed and improved. Goffman further suggests that backstage is where the performer can relax, where 'he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. Front stage (represented as the public space of the city) and backstage (as the private domestic space) are reinforced by the activities of the teenagers. As an example, in the photograph *Deep Breathing*, two avatars, male and female, are captured on the brink of combat, both wielding knives (Figure 3.10). In another photograph, *A Ming at Home*, the female avatar from the previous work is seen at home in a more relaxed pose, reading her phone.

The persistence of the teenagers staying in character is the artist's commentary about the generational gap between teenagers and their parents. This is visualised in the composition of her photograph, *A Ming at Home,* where the elder male figure (presumably a father figure) and the younger woman still in costume sit side by side (Figure 3.11). Both subjects of the work are preoccupied with reading, the elder man a newspaper and the young woman fixated on her phone. Their seated poses are also similar, each with one leg rested on another, which suggests they are both settled and comfortable. Despite the similarity of their activities, they are both visually and physically undistracted by each other's presence. This dichotomy is repeated in the depiction of other cosplayers at home, all of whom remain in their elaborate costumes and make up, doing ordinary activities in the company of their undistracted parents or elders. This visual tension is a commentary on the 'inability for either generation to compromise or reach an accord.'[391]

The fluidity of cosplay characters across front and backstage in *Cosplayers* demonstrates the impact of cosplay in promoting notions of extended selves and the embodiment of video-game or anime avatars. The teenagers' escapism into an imagined world is grounded firmly in their lived reality of a rapidly urbanised city, where cosplay provides a temporary reprieve. As Fei comments:

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[389] Goffman uses the term 'performance' to refer to all activities of an individual that occur by his continuous presence before a set of observers, which has some influence on the observers. Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life,* 13.

[390] Hale, 'Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic,' 5-37.

[391] Sollins, 'Fantasy', *Art in the Twenty-First Century.*

> They expect their costumes will grant them true magical power, enabling the wearers to transcend reality and put themselves above all worldly and mundane concerns.[392]

The always 'present' body is not attempting to realise a video game/character/anime in real life but rather attempting to engage their own body more deeply and visually by aligning their appearance, behaviours and gestures with fictional characters. For Fei, the voluntary extension of cosplay into the home is a form of 'role reversal,' where it is used as an expression of discontent with the rules of their everyday lives.

### 3.13 Artist as avatar: Cosplay

The notion of individuals intimately aligning their corporeal identities with external characters or avatars, as demonstrated in *Cosplayer*, is also explored in a series of art works created in Second Life. In 2006, Fei began to explore the virtual metaverse Second Life through her humanoid avatar China Tracy. The name 'China Tracy' evokes a fictitious noir film femme fatale; however, the artist thinks of 'China' in the Chinese tradition where the surname precedes the first name. Initially, China Tracey appeared in Second Life as an armour-clad platinum blonde Asian woman. However, both her appearance and functionality has continually evolved alongside the artist's aesthetic and operational intentions. In addition to visual upgrades, the artist also purchased upgrades that enable new functionality in Second Life – for example, she purchased female genitals that allowed her to engage in virtual sex in-world. In an interview, the artist describes the avatar as simultaneously a form of representation, product and operation. She comments:

> She's definitely me. She's Asian, but I didn't feel the need to make her look like me. I change her all the time. I have a China Tracey inventory, with all sorts of parts, like a wardrobe. I keep the same face, but lately I changed my skin. I just upgraded to skin with better texture. You know, with freckles. When I look back at my earlier videos, like 'i.Mirror', I see a China Tracy that's an old product. I'm always upgrading her, changing her.[393]

The importance of dress in the maintenance and evolution of China Tracy echoes the artist's interest in the dress practice of her earlier cosplay works. In cosplay, the image and identity of a person is never stagnant, and it is common for cosplayers to move frequently and fluidly between characters by wearing different costumes and masks. In virtual worlds such as Second Life, the notion of 'dress-up' is also present in the more productive play of residents who create and customise their own virtual objects, including clothing, hair and skin, which become part of the virtual world itself. Further, residents can use the virtual objects they create in a similar way to cosplayers who fashion their own costumes.

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[392] Cao Fei artist website, 'Cao Fei Works.'

[393] Cao Fei cited in Scott, 'Interview with Cao Fei.'

China Tracy's emergence as the representation and operation of Cao Fei in Second Life and in the art world highlighted the extimate relationship between the artist and avatar. Psychoanalyst Alain Jacques-Miller in his reading of Lacan equates 'extimacy' with the unconscious self, as Lacan states, 'this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my identity to myself, it is he who stirs me.' The attachment described by Jacques-Miller is reflected in the concurrent existence of both the artist and her avatar China Tracy in the physical art world where authorship and artistic voice is shared and occasionally blurred. The intimate relationship between artist and avatar is evident in a 2009 filmed artist interview as part of the *Art in the Twenty-First Century* series (Figure 3.12). In this interview, the artist speaks through her avatar China Tracy who introduces herself as the 'interpreter' of the artist Cao Fei and narrates in the first person for the entire segment. In the body of Second Life works *i.Mirror* (2007) and *RMB City*, authorship in the form of curation and direction is attributed to China Tracy.

China Tracy's existence beyond Second Life as an artist within the physical world has been acknowledged in several exhibitions. In 2007, Cao Fei and China Tracy were participating artists of the China Pavilion curated by Hou Hanru at the 52nd Venice Biennale.[394] The inflatable cloud-shaped 'China Tracy' pavilion was positioned outside the exhibition space and was a stand-alone installation. Within the exhibition, the artist projected machinima works and had laptops for visitors to access Second Life (Figure 3.13). The China Tracy pavilion was mirrored by the virtual China Tracy pavilion created in Second Life, curated by China Tracy herself (Figure 3.14). The Second Life version was a site to exhibit videos, photographs, diaries and interviews collected during her exploration of Second Life. The pavilion also served as an experimental space for 'in-world' art, where friends could conduct research and curate exhibitions. For the opening of the China Tracy Pavilion in Venice, there was a live-stream virtual opening in Second Life, attended by well-known curators, gallerists and collectors who attended as avatars of themselves.[395] The overlapping of the real and virtual experiences of the pavilion was indicative of the integration of digital networks and mobile technologies whereby events in virtual spaces were being reflected in physical space and vice versa.[396]

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[394] Cao Fei exhibited with Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, and Kan Xuan, in 'Everyday Miracles: Four Woman Artists in the Chinese Pavilion' (2007), curated by Hou Hanru.

[395] Leung, 'Exhibition review, Cao Fei MOMAPS1, New York City, April 3-August 30 2016,' 32.

[396] Mitchell, *M++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City,* 15.

**Figure 3.12.** Production still from the ‘Art in the Twenty-First Century’ Season 5 episode, ‘Fantasy,’ 2009. © Art21, Inc., 2009.

**Figure 3.13.** Cao Fei. China Tracy Pavilion, (Installation, mixed materials), 2007, Chinese Pavilion 52nd Venice Biennale.

**Figure 3.14 a**) China Tracy Pavilion, Second Life, curated by China Tracy. Installation view.

**Figure 3.14 b)** China Tracy Pavilion, Second Life, curated by China Tracy. Installation view.

*i.Mirror* was first presented in the China Tracy Pavilion and documents the first explorations of China Tracy in Second Life. Produced on her virtual island, the work captures that the artist's first six months were primarily preoccupied by the customisation of her avatar and her explorations of Second Life.[397] The machinima was filmed in three thematic parts that follow the wanderings and interactions of China Tracy as she traverses different landscapes, subcultures and residents. Part one is an introductory montage to Second Life that follows China Tracey's exploration of the new world and virtual consumerism. Part two follows a romantic plot between China Tracy and her friendship with another Asian avatar Hug Yue. Finally, part three returns to a montage of avatars and an exploration of youth and subcultures within Second Life. The narrative and dialogue in the documentary are presented as scrolling text-based chat at the bottom of the screen. The sense of live dialogue is emphasised by the typing sounds that also serve as a reminder of the presence of real-life peoples.

Conceptually, *i.Mirror* employs the metaphor of the mirror in the work as an overarching theme, which is essentially a reflection of the experiences and surroundings of China Tracy. Mirrors, literal and metaphorical, encourage a process of objectification, allowing individuals to see themselves and their surroundings as an image. Sherry Turkle utilised the concept of the mirror in relation to the computer, which she described as a new mirror operating as a 'projection of part of the self, a mirror of the mind.'[398] The mirror as part of construction of self is also used in Lacan's mirror stage whereby infants (under 18 months) engage in a process of self-discovery by looking in the mirror and seeing their reflections for the first time. For Lacan, like Merleau-Ponty, the process of looking into the mirror is to

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[397] Clemens, 'The Extimacy of Cao Fei,' 191-193.
[398] Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, 20.

‘assume an image’ and is a process for picturing the self as other.[399] Together, Lacan and Turkle’s theories of the mirror provide a framework for the avatar in *i.Mirror* as cognitive and embodied mirrors.

For Lacan, the mirror stage is the identification of their reflection or specular image as part of the unified sense of self or the ‘Ideal-I.’ This specular image is one of coherence and is a foundational experience of subjectivity of the internal self with an external image or the self as other. Lacan declares that this process of identification is a form of misrecognition (méconnaissance) that allows the infant to accept the specular image (which is a product of the imaginary) as its true self, despite its physical and cognitive infancy. This misrecognition creates the ego, an idealised self which individuals will perpetually try to achieve throughout their lifetimes. Lacan’s mirror stage is illustrated in one scene of *i.Mirror* where China Tracy is in a bathroom looking at her reflection in the mirror. In accompanying text-dialogue for this scene China Tracy asks the question, ‘Is my Avatar my mirror?’ to which the avatar Hug Yue responds, ‘Others it is a reflection of other things…Like aspirations.’ This short but insightful scene describes the reflective quality of virtual worlds (and technology at large) and the possibility for the avatar to function as a mirror and the mirror image of the idealised or ‘aspirational’ self.

### 3.14 Avatar as mirror

Similar to Lacan’s ‘mirror image,’ subjectivity in Second Life is inextricably tied to the visual point of view, which is highlighted in *i.Mirror*. First-person perspective is used in both virtual video games and virtual worlds to create immersive and immediate experiences that at times have the potential to trigger the body’s proprioception.[400] Machinima, films made as a form of screen capture in virtual games and virtual worlds, are entirely dependent on the particular view of a user or resident. The machinima *i.Mirror* is a form of autobiographical film making that records the actions of China Tracy in Second Life as she was experiencing them. For the artist, the first-person perspective is an embodied camera. As the artist states, ‘I have a certain kind of direction and a camera in my head. The shooting is the actual drawing. Since my childhood I like to start with a detail and let it grow bigger. It is common for me to go back and forth, adding new shots.’[401] Fei’s acknowledgement of an embodied camera manifests as shots in first- and third-person visual perspectives.

Part one of *i.Mirror* (10mins) is largely shot in the first-person perspective views of China Tracy moving through different terrains of Second Life. The slow movement of the machinima evokes the figure of the virtual flaneur, walking or flying past countless ‘for sale’ signs, high-rise buildings, derelict parts of a city and beach side properties, at times stopping to take in views. Occasionally the view shifts from the first-person visual perspective to the third-person visual perspective, a distanced view whereby the avatar China Tracy is visible.[402] The artist describes the shift in visual perspective as a process of extimacy and taking an outside position:

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[399] Lacan, *Ecrits*, 94-96.

[400] Cleland, ‘Virtual Bodies and Virtual Cyborg,’ 82.

[401] Cao Fei, email to the author, 25 June 2018.

[402] The default view of machinima in Second Life is third-person; however, this can be changed to the first-person view through the eyes of an avatar.

> I am an outsider, although I don’t like to be called one. But if one intends to traverse the filmic labyrinth with its time-impeding fog, you have to be an outsider. Only then can one experience different vantage points and passages through space and time. It was only because of this that I could, like my avatar China Tracy, soar higher, farther, to try to grasp a panoramic view while my physical body is still trapped from the rear. (When you leave the panoramic view of any game, that’s when you can finally see your avatar or the parts of your body—for example, seeing the steering wheel or your hand holding a gun. Otherwise, it’s the first-person perspective.) [403]

The shift to third-person visual perspective, which is most common in Second Life, allows the artist to step outside and see her full embodied avatar as an image. Shifting between both perspectives allows for different emphasis and affect, the first-person visual perspective offering the feeling of immersion whilst the third-person perspective allows for greater physical and psychological identification with the avatar body.[404] Elizabeth Grosz points to this notion of seeing the self as an image, ‘an external image presents us with an image of ourselves.’ This is the structure of identification: I make myself like the image of myself.[405] The shift between perspectives points to the avatar as a reflexive process of intersubjectivity where the creator can see the avatar as the object and image of the other’s gaze. This awareness of the other’s gaze is highlighted in part of the dialogue between the two avatars in part two, where the male avatar likens the constant open view of Second Life to the to the disciplinary concept of the panopticon.

**Figure 3.15.** Cao Fei, *i.Mirror* Part Two (Machinima, sound, colour, 10 minutes duration), 2007. Screenshot by author.

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[403] Biesenback, ‘Cao Fei.’
[404] Cleland, ‘Virtual Bodies and Virtual Cyborg,’ 83.
[405] Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, 23.

*i.Mirror* visualises embodiment and a sense of presence that oscillates between the physical realities of everyday life and the mediated reality of virtual life in Second Life. In part two, China Tracy documents quasi-romantic encounters with a male Asian avatar, Hug Yue, who was the avatar for a 65-year-old man from California (Fig. 3.15). The machinima follows a generic romance narrative of 'boy meets girl,' detailing two encounters between China Tracy and Hug Yue where they traverse different romantic fantasy situations – traveling on the train together, riding a flying carpet form, riding in a hot air balloon, walking hand in hand down streets, and playing musical instruments together. Alongside their fantastical encounters is a running dialogue between the avatars that also engages the 'real lives' of their creators. In the first encounter, the dialogue between both avatars is based on questions from China Tracy about Hug Yue's motivations for using Second Life, and then shifts towards engaging in the scenery. At the end of the encounter, before parting ways, the avatars engage in a dialogue about their real lives:

> Hug Yue: It was nice to meet you again, China.
>
> China Tracy: Me Too
>
> Hug Yue: What time is it now where you are from?
>
> China Tracy: 4am
>
> Hug Yue: Get some sleep, my friend. See you when I see you.
>
> China Tracy: Goodnight.[406]

The presence of the virtual avatar and the real-life users via their chat-based text dialogue presents the duality of embodiment that the avatar represents. As Justin Clemens notes, the experience of the avatar is itself 'double: you are simultaneously sitting in front of a keyboard or table in an absolutely prosaic empirical situation as you are flying through the air of a virtual island in SL.'[407] This experience of being double embodied is especially evident on the occasions where the dialogue deviates from the 'in-world' activities.

This notion of experiencing the avatar as doubly embodied is also manifested visually through the live transition of the male avatar Hug Yue from a young to an older man. The transition visually illustrates the intersubjective nature of the avatar in Second Life that encompasses the physical person. Lori Landay, in discussing virtual subjectivity in Second Life, suggests that 'if subjectivity is the first-person experience of the 'I' shaped by both individual psychological experiences and wider cultural forces, and it is intersubjective and created socially – then people behind the avatars certainly bring their actual world subjectivities into Second Life.'[408] This transition is also illustrated in the accompanying dialogue between Hug Yue and China Tracy:

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[406] Text quoted from *iMirror* Part Two.
[407] Clemens, 'The Extimacy of Cao Fei,' 197.
[408] Landay, 'Virtual KinoEye: Kinetic Camera, Machinima, and Virtual Subjectivity in Second Life.'

> China Tracy: Sometimes I am confusing the RL and SL.
>
> Hug Yue: It is okay for me to put on my old man avatar?
>
> China Tracy: It looks nice…
>
> Hug Yue: Thank you.
>
> Hug Yue: It is nearer to my reality.
>
> China Tracy: My mother is 68, my father is 73, you're 64.
>
> Hug Yue: LOL. I'm 65 now.
>
> Hug Yue: So there you are. I am old enough to be your father.
>
> China Tracy: Well, in Second Life we are young forever.
>
> Hug Yue: Yes, another illusion.[409]

The avatar Hug Yue's comments of the transition allowing him to be nearer to his lived reality reflects the ways in which virtual experiences are inextricably linked to physicality. Biocca notes that

> … in any virtual environment system there are three bodies present; the objective, the virtual body and the body schema…The objective body is the physical, observable, and measurable body of the user. The virtual body is the representation of the user's body inside the virtual environment. The body schema is the user's mental or internal representation of his or her body.[410]

The dialogue between avatars discussing the age difference also reveals the real world socio-cultural significations attached to an individual's physicality. This is evident in the dialogue between the two avatars discussing the real-life age of Hug Yue. After revealing his correct age as 65, Hug Yue makes the pointed comment: 'So there you are. I am old enough to be your father.' In the context of the romantic plot of *i.Mirror*, his comments reflect societal attitudes towards age disparity in romantic relationships in the physical world.

In the concluding part of *i.Mirror*, Fei presents a collective portrait of virtual subjectivity. Part three of *i.Mirror* comprises a montage of avatars, moving from face to face, surveying over one hundred avatars, including humanoid animal and robot forms. The montage also includes a number of scenes of 'in-world' avatar retail outlets displaying body parts, faces and adornments. Collectively, the montage of avatars creates the image of a heavily populated world constantly in the process of exploring and creating alternate and multiple avatars. The multiple images of avatars recall an earlier dialogue where Hug Yue quotes William Shakespeare 'all the world is a stage,' emphasising the dramaturgical nature of Second Life whereby individuals can play many parts through multiple avatars.

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[409] Text quoted from *i.Mirror* Part Two.

[410] Biocca, 'The Cyborg's Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments.'

### 3.15 Avatar as artist

It is useful in the examination of the artist and avatar in contemporary art to also consider the role of the avatar as artist within the context of Second Life. This slight change in emphasis acknowledges avatars as distinct selves rather than mere conduits for artists in the virtual world. Writing of virtual art in 2008, academic Patrick Lichty reflects on the discussion of objecthood in Second Life in a podcast of the artist project *Brooklyn is Watching*:

> This dialogue foregrounds fetishization/objectification of all elements within and the social contracts within user-defined online worlds. While the discussion has considered milieu-creating objects, and milieux that themselves attract objects with added levels of recursion such as the creation of avatars as art objects, that in themselves create objects and milieux. These can act as agents of creation which then create 'archives' of those interventions. These agent-objects are then generators of objects, which create region-milieux or even emergent sensibilities around their actions.[411]

Lichty introduces the framing of avatars as 'agent-objects' to describe their recursive generation and notes the possibility of sensibilities that arise through their actions. The possibility of emergent sensibilities around their action is highly evident in the work of avatars who create art in the social context of Second Life.

Art in Second Life is inherently site specific and has a much wider demographic of consumers and producers that includes established contemporary artists in the real world.[412] Patrick Lichty suggests four representational modalities of art praxis in virtual worlds. According to him, modalities refers to the 'location and intended vector direction of the work's relation between worlds, such as importing physical work into Second Life, or the realization of SL based works in the physical.'[413] The four modalities he describes as the transmediated, the evergent, the client/browser and the cybrid. He states:

> This epistemological 'movement' within and between worlds has four basic structures; work that is essentially traditional physical art translated to the virtual, 'evergent' work that is physically realized from virtual origins, the virtual itself, designed for the client/browser experience, and 'cybrids' that exist concurrently between various modalities.[414]

According to Lichty, cybrid and evergent works represent the more complex modalities of art in virtual worlds. Both modalities demonstrate 'a movement from virtual to tangible, which includes the consideration of works existing in simultaneous physical and virtual components [and] present more complex models.'[415] Combining these modalities with the notion of the avatar as an agent-object creates multiple possibilities for the emergence of different sensibilities around the actions of the avatar as artist. Further, these sensibilities accumulate and generate meaning in the liminal spaces between the virtual space of Second Life and the tangible real world.

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[411] Lichty, 'Why art in Virtual Worlds? E-Happenings, Relational Milieux & "Second Sculpture."'

[412] Second Life art is also referred to by the acronym SLART

[413] Lichty, 'The Translation of Virtual Art Worlds,' 2.

[414] Lichty, 2-3.

[415] Lichty, 2-3.

### 3.16 Artist as avatar and the avatar as artist: *RMB City,* 2008-2011

*RMB City* (2008-2011) was developed by Cao Fei and Vitamin Creative Space as an online art community and platform, designed as a project that was 'an experiment exploring the creative relationship between real and virtual space, and is a reflection of China's urban and cultural explosion.'[416] *RMB City* is a fictional Chinese city constructed on the Creative Commons' Kula Island in Second Life and is named after the Chinese unit of currency, 'renminibi,' often abbreviated to RMB. Architecturally *RMB* city is the artist's own utopia of a Chinese city, drawing on landmarks and structures including Tiananmen Square, represented as an infinity pool, and the Birds Nest stadium that was constructed for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, represented as rusty ruins. Other fantastical elements include a giant floating panda (the city's 'love centre'), Ferris wheel and the national flag of China floating above. Partly as response to the rapid urbanisation of China, the virtual utopia was also envisioned to create a sense of belonging, as Fei states,

> When I create 'i.Mirror' and 'China Tracy Pavilion'...I plan to build a space, an ideal city for China Tracy. China Tracy thinks that most of the cities in Second life are in western style and she wants to see the characteristics of Chinese urbanization – a city, whatever how awkward and isolated it might look. That matches the Chinese aesthetics and identity.[417]

The virtual city had been in construction for two years between 2006 and 2008 before its public launch in Second Life on 10 January 2009. To mark the public opening on Second Life the city held a festive ceremony and announced its governance structure through the appointment of the inaugural mayor UliSigg Cisse, the avatar of the real-world art collector Ulli Sigg.[418]

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[416] *RMB* City archived on Rhizome.

[417] Cao Fei email to artist, 25 June 2018.

[418] In total RMB city appointed five mayors, many of whom hold leadership roles in the physical art world including contemporary Chinese art patron, Uli Sigg (Second Life Avatar: UliSIgg Cisse); Jerome Sans (Second life: Super Concierge Cristole), Director of the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing from 2008-2011; and Alexandra Munroe (Second life avatar: Supernova Sibliant), Senior Curator of Asian Art, Guggenheim Museum.

**Figure 3.16**. Cao Fei and China Tracy, *RMB City*, 2007. Still Image

*RMB City* is a complex project that in the course of its development and operation has taken on various modalities of virtual art. To return to Lichty's framework of modality, *RMB City* in its planning and eventual operation and running demonstrates a constant movement and creation of meaning between the real and virtual. While the work can be described as being 'cybrid' in its concurrent existence in virtual and physical space, its 'centre of gravity' or site of focus has changed at different stages of the project. During the planning and development stages of *RMB City*, the platform was largely manifested as a physical exhibition whereby virtual components were rendered into physical form.

At Art Basel Miami 2007, *RMB* city was presented as a real-world real estate project. The project mimicked the structure and investment of urban planning by inviting institutions and collectors to buy buildings in RMB city and commit to running programmes within them. Touted as the 'Investors World Premiere,' the exhibition was presented in a shipping container and included information and a promotional aerial survey video, *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* (2007). Special merchandise was available, including branded RMB City hardhats and investment booklets, detailing the sale of RMB units for collectors and investors, with all sales profit contributing to the RMB City Foundation for the development and running costs of the virtual city. One recorded account notes the alleged investment of USD 100,000 from an unidentified art collector at the fair.[419]

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[419] This real-estate presentation of RMB City was also presented at the Istanbul Biennial in 2007.

**Figure 3.17**. Cao Fei and China Tracy, *RMB city*, 2007, Art Basel Miami. Investors World Premiere Flyer.

**Figure 3.18.** Cao Fei and China Tracy, *RMB City*, 2007, Art Basel Miami. Installation view.

Within the framework of urban development, *RMB City* from its inception has maintained an interest in the economy of the art world. Art historian Alice Ming-Wai Jim notes, '*RMB City* is not just an Asian island city in SL, it is also a product of the international art world network that sees a primary investment in contemporary Chinese art.'[420] Later presentations of *RMB City* promoted the project as a real-estate opportunity, encouraging further investment by the art world in Second Life as reflected in their billing slogan 'My City is Yours, Your City is Mine.' In 2008, *RMB City* found an institutional partner in the Serpentine Gallery in London, who presented the construction process on their website and in their gallery lobby for a full year. In addition to videos detailing the city construction, the gallery also presented two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations of the plans alongside weekly updates of progress in Second Life. In another presentation in Lombard-Fried Projects in New York, *RMB City* was presented as a temporary city leasing office and showroom, where the public could view a *RMB City* model, promotional videos and detailed preview images. Real-time updates of construction in Second Life were also available for the public to view via laptops.[421] This latter presentation was hugely significant in framing Cao Fei's avatar China Tracy as the 'chief developer' of this new virtual real estate project.

**Figure 3.19.** Cao Fei and China Tracy, *RMB City*, 2008, Lombard Fried Projects. Installation view.

These concurrent presentations of the construction of *RMB City* in the virtual space of Second Life and in the physical spaces of multiple galleries and exhibitions also highlighted the concurrent actions and roles of the avatar. Through the real-world presentations of *RMB City* as a real-estate project, the actions of the avatar China Tracy were reframed in her role as an entrepreneur and developer. Concurrently in Second Life, during the construction of *RMB City* when it was officially uninhabitable, China Tracy was engaged as an artist creating works with her fellow collaborators in the unfinished city. For the Yokohama Triennale in 2008, Fei and China Tracy created a designated area in *RMB City* entitled ‘Play with your Triennale,’ inviting participation of the general public. In the press release, the general public were invited to realize their dream projects in the people’s worksite by submitting ‘dream proposals’ via email to the RMB project team.[422] In addition to the physical exhibition, other events occurred wholly in world, including a special collaborative project with controversial Chinese author Mian Mian, which modelled a form of patronage.[423] *Love Letter to an Avatar* (2008) invited anyone in Second Life to commission an original love letter from Mian Mian to another avatar of their choice. To order a love letter, interested parties contacted the art dealer of RMB City with a Second Life avatar photo of their recipient and a fee of their own choice, with a minimum of $1 Linden Dollar. Interestingly, the press release also stipulated one restriction – that the recipient of the love letter must be ‘a stranger’ to the author.

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[420] Ming Wai Jim, 'The Different Worlds of Cao Fei,' 82-90.
[421] Fei, 'RMB City Blog.'

Evident in the construction phases of *RMB City* was what the artist has described as the ‘border-crossing spirit’ of the project and the avatar.[424] B. Coleman describes this sense of concurrency and being in two places at once as ‘x-reality,’ offering the following definition:

> Traditionally ‘x’ as a prefix has meant ‘cross,’ where one finds a bridge between one thing and another. For example, cross-reality design, a category within pervasive computing, describes primarily sensor networks that informationally connect real spaces to virtual ones. I am appropriating the x of X-reality to stand for an x-factor of variable, as it would in an equation…I am advocating for multidirectional and multivalent understanding of the nature of pervasive media. In this sense, x-reality describes a world that is no longer virtual or real, but instead, representative of a diversity of network combinations.[425]

Coleman’s definition of x-reality offers a useful conceptual framework for the multivalent nature of *RMB City*, which manifested in various physical and virtual forms. Since *RMB City* opened in January 2009, it has hosted over a dozen in-world art activities, including live performance pieces by other contemporary artists, such as *Master Q’s Guide to Virtual Feng Shui* by Guangzhou-based artist Huang He. China Tracy also continued to create machinima that documented life in the city, including *Live in RMB*, which documents the arrival of her new-born son China Sun. In the physical world, the project continued to surface as exhibitions and new performative forms in the *RMB City Opera*, an experimental theatrical play that explores the connection between real and virtual identities by presenting actors on the physical stage and their avatars on the virtual stage of Second Life. *RMB City* also produced its own discourse through a dedicated blog and physical newsletter, ‘Peoples Monthly,’ that included documentation of the city and associated projects, and interviews and articles with curators, collaborators and the inaugural mayor.

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[422] Cao Fei artist website, ‘RMB City.’

[423] Mian Mian was a popular for her underground erotic novel that was considered scandalous and was banned by the Chinese Government.

[424] Cao Fei artist website, ‘Play with Your Triennale.’

[425] Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation*, 19.

The many different manifestations and collaborations of *RMB City* reflect Coleman's definition of an 'x reality' and the integrated nature of virtual and physical space. Coleman notes:

> With x reality I mark a turn towards an engagement of networked media integrated into daily life, perceived as a continuum of actual events. This is a move away from computer-generated space, places and worlds that are outside of what we might call real life and transition into a mobile, real time, and pervasively networked landscape.[426]

Applying the 'x reality' to the avatar, and specifically China Tracy in *RMB City*, provides a powerful acknowledgement of the avatar as a pervasive form. Each presentation of China Tracy in *RMB City* should not be seen as a singular event that is exclusive; rather, they are a part of a continuum of self and subjectivity that is mobile, real and increasingly pervasive.

Virtual reality continues to be a realm of interest for contemporary artists who, through their works, have helped to shape collective perception and understanding of the trope of the avatar. This chapter has addressed how virtual reality has brought forth figures such as the cyborg, and later the avatar, as vehicles to navigate and experience new realms. Since early explorations of virtual reality, artists have framed the avatar as being connected or 'appended' to the subject, creating an extimate relationship between the avatar and the body. Through the virtual world of Second Life, contemporary artists have further developed the trope of the embodied avatar as an extension of their practice and their subjectivity. In the work of Eva and Franco Mattes, the avatar is framed as a form of self-portraiture and identity play, which harks back to early explorations of identity in the Multi User Domains of the 1990s. For the artists, it also allowed them to extend their practices 'in-world' and to represent themselves authentically, which marked a departure from their offline practice where they adopt different monikers. Through discussing their still images or 'pictures of self-portraits,' this chapter has demonstrated how the figure of the avatar enables new forms of self-portraiture and flanerie. The subsequent display of avatars within the contemporary art gallery through still images gave visibility to the figure of the avatar as codified and culturally constructed forms of self-representation. This chapter has also challenged the notion of the avatar as a simple prosthesis through the work of Cao Fei and China Tracy. Through works such as *i.Mirror* and the embodied camera of machinima, this chapter has illustrated how the figure of the avatar in Second Life can operate as medium and a mirror that allows users to see themselves as an externalised and embodied image. The simultaneity of Fei and her avatar and its widespread acknowledgement in contemporary art contributed to the shaping of the figure of the avatar as an embodied extension of the artist. Collectively, the work of Fei and of Mattes reconfigure the notion of the avatar as a simple proxy towards a new understanding of the avatar as a form of extimacy that is experiential and embodied.

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[426] Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation*, 20.

# 4. Extimate avatars and interactive art games

Contemporary art has had a long engagement with games and gaming that extends beyond the era of mobile internet. The influence of the growing gaming culture on contemporary art is reflected in the emergence of the artgame movement in the early 2000s. The artgame movement modelled a convergence of art and gaming through the independent games of artists who employed gaming as a creative medium. This chapter looks at the continued artistic and expressive use of games beyond this movement through the work of artists and game developers creating interactive art games. By employing the notion of extimacy and avatars as extimate forms, these artists utilise games as a medium to reflect on personal memory, collective action and political histories. This chapter will examine interactive art games artists and game designers whose artistic intentions guide their materiality and systems to create extimate avatars as a communicative link between the player and the game. This chapter will look at interactive art games by Alan Kwan, Feng Mengbo and Momo Pixel, all of whom utilise games as an artistic and expressive medium. Through a close examination of the materiality of their interactive art games, this chapter will highlight the ways in which the player-avatar relationships are used in ways to evoke feelings, memories and political views. Included in this analysis is discussion of the game narrative, gameplay and game rules, to contextualise the function of the extimate avatar within them. Critical to this chapter is the avatar as a performed entity that is engaged in play as part of a feedback loop that connects the player with the game in ways that reflect the overall intention of the artists and game designers.

## 4.1 Games, Game Art and Art Games– Defining the scope of this chapter

This chapter focuses on a moment of convergence of contemporary art and gaming that begins in 2007 with the emergence of the artgame movement.  Games and gaming methodology in and as contemporary art has a long history that extends to the earlier twentieth century and the use of games such as Exquisite Corpse by artists of the Surrealist movement.[427] Art historian John Sharpe acknowledges that artists' communities and gaming communities have different conceptual, formal and experiential affordances that define the use of games. For Sharpe, cultural affordances define the different types of things that cultural forms such as games can be used for. Formal affordances detail the formal qualities of the cultural forms and include the tools, techniques and methods. Experiential affordances describe the types of experiences an audience anticipates having through consuming such cultural forms.[428] Experiential affordances emerge from gameplay and include the experiential expectations and the context where the cultural form is experienced. Sharpe argues that all three affordances are in play in games.[429] This provides a framework for thinking about how artists and gamers have shared unique approaches to the cultural forms of games and gaming.[430] To illustrate this, Sharp uses the example of a game of chess that for game communities is simply a game to played; however, within art communities chess has also been utilised conceptually and materially to create artworks.[431]

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[427] Exquisite corpse is a group game where each participant takes turn writing or drawing on a sheet of paper. Each participant folds the paper to conceal their contribution and it is passed onto the next person who does the same. This game was adopted as a technique by artists of the Surrealist movement to generate collaborative compositions.

[428] Sharp, 'Artgames,' 4.

[429] Gameplay refers to the experiences of the player and the actions (cognitive, physical, strategic) performed by the player that influences the outcome of the game they are playing. See Guardiola and Natkin, 'Player's Model: Criteria for a Gameplay Profile Measure,' 366-367.

The cultural form of gaming is perhaps most popularly associated with AAA games produced by major commercial publishers; however, gaming encompasses a range of games, including video games, computer-based games and game consoles. The first decade of mobile internet technological advancements in graphics and hardware also saw the rapid growth of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG).[432] Also within this landscape are independent games created with artistic intent to create game-based artworks.[433] Sharpe defines three categories of game-based artworks: game art, artgames and artists games that employ games as an artistic medium. Sharpe defines game art quite simply as art made with games to achieve a variety of artistic goals and expressive intentions. Game art involves the appropriation of the tools and tropes of the game industry to create artworks with a variety of artistic goals and expressive intentions. The second category, artgames, aligns with the artgame movement amongst the independent games community active in the mid-2000s.[434] Artgames use the properties and systems of games, including interactive game mechanics and player goals, to create expressive play experiences that explore various phenomena and, in some cases, aspects of the human condition.[435] The last category of game-based art is ‘artist games,’ works that utilise play as a medium concerned with performed experience. This shifts away from the objects utilised to play the game and focuses instead on the process, even if the materiality and context are temporary. Artist games construct gameplay experiences through rules, mechanics and setting goals to create a space for player actions.[436]

This chapter expands beyond the artgame movement to examine the work of artists and game developers to create interactive art games. Interactive art games utilise the avatar as a strategic medium through structured play experiences. The artists and game developers of interactive art games discussed in this chapter share a systemic understanding of games as systems set in motion and experienced through play.[437] Their use of game systems and play deviates from the goal of entertainment-based games and aligns with the intentions of artgame artists. Sharp argues that artgame makers were interested in games in a more functional way, as he states:

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[430] Sharp, ‘Artgames,’ 7.

[431] There are multiple examples of artists exploring the conceptual and material nature of chess, most famously Marcel Duchamp, who saw a strong correlation between art and chess.

[432] Multiplayer Online Games include various styles including Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG), Massively Multiplayer Online First Person Shooter Games (MMOFPS) and Massively Multiplayer Online Sports Game (MMOS). Unlike the virtual world of Second Life, where avatars engage in open-ended socialisation as play, Massively Multiplayer Online Games utilise the avatar in structured goal-oriented gameplay.

[433] Sharp, ‘Artgames,’ 7.

[434] Alternative terms for artgames include ‘art games’ or ‘art-house games.’

[435] Sharp, ‘Artgames,’ 50.

[436] Sharp, 84-85.

[437] Sharp, 51-52.

> Artgame makers embraced a functionalist ideal whereby the play of an artgame was intended to have some social, intellectual, moral, or humanistic impact on the player… Artgames tend to be about something and, more specifically, about a particular rhetorical perspective on that something: relationships, the tyranny of time, complicity and so forth.

Within these games, the figures of the avatar plays a central role as performed entities that game players (users) perform through and with. Unlike the open-game play of artists in virtual worlds such as Second Life, the avatars in interactive art games have clear parameters of activity. Interactive art games create a feedback loop between the player, avatar and game that aligns with the aspirations and intentions of the artist.

### 4.2 The extimate avatar and the player relationship

The word avatar and its use in games was first used in the ‘many-player online virtual environment’ *Habitat* developed in 1985. In this virtual world, the players were represented by animated figures called ‘Avatars’ that were humanoid in appearance. Game developers Morningstar and Farmer note that avatars provide both the medium and mode for engagement and communication: ‘Avatars can move around, pick up, put down, and manipulate objects, talk to each other, and gesture, under the control of an individual player.’[438] In online games, the body of a player is extended into the virtual gameworld,[439] through devices that allow the player to perform through an avatar. The avatar thus is an entity that can be owned, customised and inhabited and through which the player can perform ‘with or as.’ It is an embodied manifestation of the player and reflects an agency, as noted by media studies scholar Alison Gazzard who states, ‘we choose our avatars, or they are created for us. We choose to play as them, to move as them and our actions are translated onto them.’[440]

The translation of actions on and through the avatar describes an extimate relationship where the player extends and performs actions through something outside of him or herself. This relationship evokes psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s concept of extimacy as an intimate exteriority, where the ‘unconsciousness’ is located ‘outside.’ Within this framework, the avatar can be considered an extimate object, a performed body for players to extend and transfer their actions. Within interactive art games and games in general, the avatar is the medium through which a player can externalise and materialise feelings and actions. The embodied nature of the avatar and player relationship is enacted through play; as Rune Klevjer argues, ‘the avatar is the embodied manifestation of the player’ engagement with the gameworld; it is the player incarnated.’[441]

Through the avatar, the player is able to adopt a subject-position that creates a feedback loop of interaction that can be seen, heard and experienced. Gazzard argues that the feedback loop between player and avatar can create agency, investment and attachment:

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[438] Chip and Morningstar and Randall, ‘Lessons of Lucasfilm's Habitat,’ 275.
[439] Gameworld refers to the environment of the game.
[440] Gazzard, ‘The Avatar and the Player: Understanding the Relationship Beyond the Screen,’191.
[441] Klevjer, ‘What is the Avatar?,’ 4.

> Understanding the onscreen depiction of the user/player and the feedback of the player->controller->avatar movement shows the user/player their role within the virtual environment. Is it through recognising this feedback loop that users/players can develop their understanding as to what they are manipulating in the virtual world and why […] The displayed avatar may be seen as a common element of some serious games but players use the avatar to gain rewards and/or learn about the virtual space they are now in, therefore users/players have an attachment to them, an investment in them.[442]

This feedback loop between the player, avatar and controller demonstrates the ways in which the avatar exists beyond a form of representation. In addition to a visual representation, the feedback loop enables players to conduct different performances and form an emotional attachment with the avatar through game play. Gazzard proposes a shift in the discussion of the feedback loop that focuses not on the 'point of view' as filtered through the screen but what she describes as 'altered positions of the avatar.'[443] Gazzard identifies four 'altered positions' that are tied to the visual point of view in gaming. The first altered position is identified where there is no or limited avatar display; the second altered position where the partial avatar is shown; the third altered position where the full avatar is displayed that is linked to the camera movement; and the fourth altered position where the full avatar is displayed and can exist alone or in teams and is not linked to camera movement. A dynamic and alterable perspective gives the player greater awareness of the gameworld and the avatar's subject-position within it. [444] The ability to control and direct the virtual camera, and alter the perspective separately from the direct actions of the avatar as part of gameplay, becomes as important as the actions of the avatar.[445]

### 4.3 Player as avatar

The embodied relationship between the avatar and the player is a negotiation between the player's material body and the avatar virtual bodies that can produce different effects. Digital gaming scholar Melanie Swalwell suggests that 'being brought into close relation with avatars during the course of gameplay can foster a relation of intersubjectivity between player and avatar, rather than the oft-presumed distanced relation of mastery.'[446] In discussing the third person game *Tomb Raider,* Kate O'Riordan argues that through game play, the body is brought into direct connection with the avatar:

> While playing, the body is directly connected to the action on the screen, entering into an affective physical relationship with the programming code. Through the physical and psychological continuum with Lara, the player enters into a symbiotic hybridity which negotiates game space so that the self becomes the self and avatar, in a diffuse but distinct relationship between person and machine.[447]

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[442] Gazzard, 'The Avatar and the Player: Understanding the Relationship Beyond the Screen,' 193.
[443] Gazzard, 191.
[444] Crick, 'The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,' 261.
[445] Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 84-85.
[446] Swalwell, 'Movement and Kinesthetic Responsiveness: A Neglected Pleasure,' 91.
[447] O'Riordan, 'Playing with Lara in Virtual Space,' 236.

As O'Riordan suggests, the player-avatar relationship also includes material engagement with the avatar as a machine or software element. O'Riordan's framing of the player-avatar relationship resonates with the framing of the avatar by media scholar James Newman, who describes the avatar as a form of 'vehicular embodiment.' According to Newman, the avatar has available 'game-specific techniques and capabilities that the player uses, and more importantly, embodies within the gameworld.'[448]

The embodied relationship between the player and the avatar, and the physical body and material software, can be interpreted within a phenomenological framework. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty posits the embodied nature of knowledge and the body as the site and context through which subjects understand their environment. This is evident in the relationship between the player's body, the avatar and the gameworld, as gaming scholar Timothy Cricks argues:

> When I 'enter' the virtual world of a FPS such as Call of Duty 4, my experience is not one of disembodied perception nor can my body be reducible to a mere set of eyeballs. For example, my heartbeat races or my body feels rushes of excitements and jolts during moments of intense combat with NPC. Furthermore, during some gaming moments, I will be aware that my body intuitively leans towards the direction to which I require my avatar to run.[449]

The latter physical response is described by Swalwell as a 'kinaesthetic responsiveness,' where players' bodies move with an avatar.[450] The momentary synchronisation of the body and the avatar highlights the agency of the body to identify with and 'as' the avatar as a holistic experience that engages the sight and body. This aligns with the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty who suggests that 'there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense.'[451]

There is a strong similarity between the player and avatar relationships in gaming and virtual worlds. In both contexts, the avatar functions as a technological prosthesis of the players and their bodies. Similar to the concept of 'artists as avatar,' games encourage players to inhabit their avatars as part of their corporeal schema: thus in gaming the player is the avatar. According to Merleau-Ponty, the corporeal schema highlights the dynamic nature of the body in its living environment and encompasses motor performances of the body that occur out of habit rather than conscious choice. In contrast to virtual worlds which have open play, structured games allow players to become accustomed to and develop habits and strategies through repeated gameplay. Gameplay as a recursive habit enables the avatar to be incorporated into the player's corporeal schema, as Merleau-Ponty states: 'habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments.'[452]

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[448] Newman, 'The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame.'
[449] Crick, 'The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,' 266.
[450] Swalwell, 'Movement and Kinesthetic Responsiveness: A Neglected Pleasure,' 80-81.
[451] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.
[452] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 143.

In the creation of interactive art games, the artist takes an active role not as the avatar or protagonist but as a game designer. Here artistic intention manifests in the construction of structured gameplay within a gameworld, and the development of avatar(s) to be inhabited and activated by players who interact with their games. In the creation of the avatar, the artists create what Timothy Crick describes as the invisible 'game body,' extending film theorist Vivian Sobchack's concept of a 'film body.' Sobchack's concept of the 'film body' describes the ways film is 'perceived not only as an object for vision but also as a subject of vision.'[453] According to Sobchack, films address the viewer by providing a film that can be seen, but in addition the film provides a mode of seeing that is subjective and intentional. Crick extends this notion of the film body to propose that visual gaming perspectives create an invisible game body. Similar to the film body, the concept of the game body represents an active embodied consciousness and point of view that is a 'visible object' and a 'viewing subject' for the player.[454]

Where the artist takes on the role of the game designer, the players, whether in a gallery context or online, play a central role in activating the avatar, the narratives of the game and the gameworld itself. As the participation of the player is critical to the game and the realisation of the artist's intention, it can be considered a form of participatory art. Art historian Claire Bishop, in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, defines participation as people that 'constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance.'[455] In her definition of participatory art, Bishop excludes digital art forms such as gaming, which she would later define as 'new media art.' [456] Within her framework, games would be considered 'interactive art' rather than participatory, which for Bishop involves many people as 'opposed to the one-to-one relationship of interactivity.'[457] However, games are not only made for a single user but can encompass multiplayers, as in the massively multiplayer games online and multiplayer games. Within the context of contemporary art, the presentation of interactive art games can also involve non-players who engage with the game and the avatars indirectly as spectators. Thus interactive art games can be considered a form of participatory art that draws on new forms of participation. Consistent across interactive art games is the centrality of the player as the medium of the work and as inhabiting the avatar as a performed entity.

### 4.4 Player as avatar: *The Hallway,* 2016, Alan Kwan

The concept of the player as avatar is illustrated in the interactive art game *The Hallway* (2016) by artist, game designer and technologist Alan Kwan (Figure 4.1). *The Hallway* is a single-player game that places players into the first-person perspective of a five-year-old child. The game is inspired by a personal childhood memory of Kwan crying over a fruit platter and his father sending him into the hallway with the doors closed as a punishment.[458] This childhood memory and the feelings of isolation and rejection become the narrative and framework for the gameworld (environment) and game play. Kwan’s gameworld is an enclosed apartment hallway where the first-person player is a mobile spectator who is able to wander through the hallway. The game is played via a game controller and is structured as a journey through a seemingly never-ending hallway.

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[453] Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience,* 62-63.
[454] Crick, 'The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,' 263.
[455] Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2.
[456] Bishop, 'Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media.'
[457] Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 1.
[458] Kwan, 'Fluid Spaces,' 7-8.

The game starts with the player standing at one end of the hallway facing home and then allows the player to walk to the other end of the hallway, encountering objects within the hallways or opening doors. When the player opens a door, the game will generate a completely identical hallway scene with the same props, finishes and effects. The hallway is flipped 180 degrees so that the player will have the impression of exiting and entering the same hallway scene simultaneously. For Kwan, the experience of walking through repetitive scenes creates a sense of exploration and a state of ‘suspended playing’ that allows them to evoke their own memories in gameplay.[459]

**Figure 4.1**. Alan Kwan, *The Hallway* (Video game, monitor, sound, colour, handheld controller), 2016, Pearl Lam Gallery. Installation view.

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[459] Kwan, 72-76.

**Figure 4.2.a)** Alan Kwan, *The Hallway,* 2016. (Video game, monitor, sound, colour, handheld controller), 2016. Screenshot of player controller instructions.

**Figure 4.2.b)** Alan Kwan, *The Hallway* (Video game, monitor, sound, colour, handheld controller), 2016. Screenshot of player view from the beginning of the hallway.

**Figure 4.2.c)** Alan Kwan, *The Hallway* (Video game, monitor, sound, colour, handheld controller), 2016. Screenshot of the opening of a door to an identical hallway.

Kwan utilises the first-person perspective in an evocative manner to allow players to occupy the perspective of a child. With first-person games there is no visible graphic avatar present, and the players occupy or inhabit the avatarial view and therefore play as themselves. In the game, the players extend themselves to envelop the views and perspective of the child; they become the child in this game. In doing so, the player enacts an extimate relationship with the avatarial view of the game or what Crick describes as the 'game body.' As Crick argues, the absence of the graphic avatar enables the player to occupy the game body and to play as themselves. He notes:

> However, because the player is not seeing an imaginary view, but rather the avatar's view as it occupies the 'game body' perspective (similar to a point-of-view shot in cinema), the player is, then, simultaneously operating on and in the game world's diegetic space and thus can 'pass' through the screen.[460]

By occupying the first-person perspective, *The Hallway* functions as a form of autobiographical mediation. Sharp notes that, in the mid-2000s, the use of games as a vehicle for autobiography was unexpected and deviated from the use of games as commercially driven forms of entertainment. Autobiographical games utilise gaming as an expressive medium to evoke feelings in ways similar to that of other artistic mediums such as painting, poems or songs.[461] In *The Hallway*, Kwan utilises the mechanics and materiality of the game as a vehicle for a personal childhood experience and to evoke feelings of isolation associated with this memory. The notion of isolation is articulated in the architecture of the hallway, which is conceived as a windowless sealed indoor space.[462] The sense of isolation is emphasised by the acoustics of the game that separates the player from the primary sources of sound. Other than the player's footsteps, the sounds of the child's parents and neighbours come from inside the apartments while the player is stuck in the hallway. For Kwan, the enclosed hallway space with no view to the outside world creates a claustrophobic feeling for the player. This is heightened by the acoustic isolation, which serves as a metaphor for the psychological distance between the child and the adults in their apartments.[463]

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[460] Crick, 'The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,' 263.
[461] Sharp, 'Artgames,' 62.
[462] There is one scene at the end of the game where a door leads into a staircase that has one window.

Through game mechanics such as placing interactive objects, Kwan invites the player to draw on their own meanings and childhood memories. Common game mechanics include the rules of the game, the narrative, different game levels and the objects or props that the player will interact with. Game developer Richard Rouse defines game mechanics as 'what players are able to do in the game-world, how they do it, and how that leads to a compelling gameplay experience.'[464] Kwan encourages players to evoke an extimate association with the game by encouraging them to wander, roam and play with props in the hallway. For example, outside one of the closed doors of the hallway is a pair of sandals on a doormat, which was inspired by Kwan's childhood memories of stealing shoes left in the hallway and wearing them. This form of dress-up play is incorporated into the game as players are able to pick up the shoes and walk in them. Other play objects include a tricycle and binoculars that have no specific objective or instructions and are there to be simple 'playthings' for the players. Players are also able to crawl under a table and hide in the cabinets.

**Figure 4.2.d)** Alan Kwan, *The Hallway* (Video game, monitor, sound, colour, handheld controller), 2016. Screenshot of encouraging player to press doorbell.

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[463] Kwan, 'Fluid Spaces,' 56.
[464] Rouse, *Game Design Theory and Practice*, 310.

Other props in the game are designed to trigger memory and evoke emotions associated with this experience, such as rejection and insecurity. In *The Hallway* players can ring the doorbell as often as they like, but no one will answer the doorbell to allow them to enter. The game also encourages the player to press the doorbell repeatedly through text-based messages on-screen, prompting repeated behaviours and amplifying the feeling of rejection through repeated denied entry (Figure 4.2). This rejection and lack of access is echoed in other props in the hallway that are physically out of reach for the child. For example, the elevator lift in the hallway also features buttons, but these are positioned out of reach of the child, thus eliminating the possibility of exiting. This inaccessibility is heightened by the soundscape of the elevator moving between floors which can be heard occasionally through the closed elevator doors. Another static non-interactive prop that is out of reach is a painting that is hung high on the wall so that it cannot be viewed by the player.[465]

### 4.5 Extimate avatars and play-as-activism

From child's play to activism, the creation of interactive art games has also responded to wider cultural and political practices. New forms of participation that emerged in the age of mobile internet, such as sharing via social media, aided new forms of online activism. Social media helped to facilitate online activism by creating opportunities for individuals to express experiences and opinions. It also allowed online communities to coordinate support, organise activities and combat negative reactions to their activities. Lastly, it created opportunities for empowerment for online communities to extend their reach to new audiences and share their experience.[466] Feminist media scholar Shira Chess extended the potential of online activism to the potential of online gaming in a prescient proposal, as she states, '… with the growth of online gaming, these public spaces are opening up into virtual spaces, creating limitless possibilities for potential forms of playful activism.'[467] Chess proposes treating play as activism (and activism as play) to provide space and tools to push forward feminist causes because, as she states, 'the playful can be political too'.[468]

The political potential of games and the approach of play as activism reflect the relationship between online and offline collective action. As mentioned, the use of social media has aided the mobilisation of online activist communities and their offline activities such as protests and gatherings. Greijdanus et al. propose that the independent nature of collective action organised online, without the need for formal structures, has created a form of 'connective action.'[469] This connective action is a 'bottom up' mobilisation that works through interconnected personal networks that have the potential to transition online activism into offline activism. While not all online activism transitions to offline actions, there is a strong correlation between them because people's online and offline lives are often intertwined. This correlation between online and offline collective action can also be seen in the use of games as a medium and tool for collective action.

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[465] Kwan, 'Fluid Spaces,' 48.

[466] Greijdanus et al., 'The Psychology of Online Activism and Social Movements: Relations between Online and Offline Collective Action,' 49.

[467] Chess, 'How to Play a Feminist,' 13.

[468] Chess, 14.

[469] Greijdanus et al., 'The Psychology of Online Activism and Social Movements: Relations between Online and Offline Collective Action,' 49-54.

Games that encourage play as activism utilise the avatar and player relationship with a political agenda. This positioning calls on Lacan's notion of extimacy in the extension and externalisation of an individual's political voice onto and through a gaming avatar. The symbolic and communicative nature of politically charged avatars illustrates Lacan's notion of extimacy as an exterior form of intimacy or extimacy where he argues the unconscious is outside. Andre Nuddleser elaborates on this relationship further:

> The playful images of ourselves, which we can find so easily in the avatar on the Internet, are still 'avatars' of an invisible, transcendental Self. The rational pattern is to see the (repetitive) structure in all the images and communicative behaviours that appear to be fully liberated due to the freedom of information. The virtual subject, our Self that communicates by means of signifiers, thus still connects to the physical space of its body and world.[63]

Where the extimate avatar is utilised for politically driven gameplay, the avatar becomes a signifier for the experiences and realities of the physical world. For Lacan, 'the unconscious is structured as a language,' referring to a language of signifiers that inverts the dyadic two-part model of the sign by linguist Ferdinand Saussure. Lacan inverted Saussure's composition of the sign as a signifier (form) and signified (concept) to prioritise the signifier, both material and physical, and the relationship between them that creates meaning.[470]

### 4.6 Black Lives Matter collective action and play as activism

The efficiencies of mobile internet and global connectivity enables activists to organize and mobilize quickly both online and offline, leading to global collective action. A definitive collective movement in the era of mobile internet was the Black Lives Matter movement which was activated by the work of the formal organisation #BlackLivesMatter.[471] The organisation #BlackLivesMatter originated in 2013 as a Black-centred political will and movement by three women, Alicia Garz, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, and was created in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer George Zimmerman. On the organisation's website the movement is described as:

> an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.[472]

Originally beginning as a hashtag protest on Twitter, the phrase has gained traction and currency as the principle for organising protests in the United States of America and has grown into a global movement.[473] Brianne McGonigle Leyh notes the recent response to the killing of George Floyd on 22

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[470] Thom, 'The Unconscious Structured as a Language,' 11-14.

[471] Here the term Black Lives Matter movement refers to the global social justice movement rather than the organisation.

[472] #Black Lives Matter, 'Herstory.'

[473] Tillery, 'What Kind of Movement is Black Lives Matter? the View from Twitter,' 297-298.

August 2020, when the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded over 7,750 demonstrations linked to the Black Lives Matter movement. Further, Leyh notes how the protests have resonated around the world with further protests held in over 70 countries, contributing to the growth of a global social justice movement demanding an end to racism and police brutality.[474]

The global movement and collective awareness to end racism and police brutality worldwide had a profound impact on multiple levels of society. This includes revisionist actions towards addressing repressive histories and their glorification in public monuments and the perpetuation of racist representations in popular culture.[475] Within gaming, the aftermath of George Floyd's death also inspired collective action amongst AAA commercial game publishers. Responses included memorialisations within online games, such as the two hours shut down by Two Interactive for its most popular games, *Grand Theft Auto Online*, *Red Dead Online* and *NBA 2k*, in memory of George Floyd. Other games, such as *Call of Duty*, display messages supporting Black Lives Matter as part of the start-up of the game. Other actions included fundraising campaigns by Bungie, the maker of the online multiplayer first-person shooter game *Destiny 2*. To support the Equal Justice Initiative, Bungie sold enamel Black Lives Matter pins that allowed players to add a digital version to their game avatars. The ability to adorn their game avatar with a similar pin extended the movement and the players' activism into the game world.[476]

### 4.7 Play-as-activism: Hair Nah, 2017, Momo Pixel

The use of gaming as a medium to address issues of racism and the experiences of black women is at the heart of the online game *Hair Nah* (2017), developed by artistic director and game developer Momo Pixel. The 8-bit video game is available online and can be played on any internet-enabled device. The interactive art game has also been exhibited in a contemporary gallery context.[477] The game was inspired by Pixel's personal experiences as a black woman of people touching her hair without permission, a common phenomenon experienced by black women and women of colour. Pixel gives insight to the experience of this in an interview, stating:

> When this happens to us we don't really get a chance to defend ourselves. At least, I know when it happens to me that there was no prelude, so I didn't know it was about to happen, or it happens just because our whole lives we've been taught that we have to be quiet and respect white people's feelings and don't really say what we want to say but as a whole you don't hear of black women being like, 'What the fuck! Why you in my hair?' You want to, but

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[474] Leyh, 'Imperatives of the Present: Black Lives Matter and the Politics of Memory and Memorialization,' 240.

[475] Key examples include the removal of monuments and public sculptures that are linked to histories of racism. In the wake of the protests of George Floyd, HBO Max removed the film Gone with the Wind from their library, stating their intention to release it with an introductory disclaimer that addresses the historical context of the film and to denounce the racist depictions with the film and its denial of the horrors of slavery. Spangler, 'HBO Max Restores "Gone with the Wind" with Disclaimer Saying Film "Denies the Horrors of Slavery".'

[476] Bray, 'Even in Video Games, Politics and Race Divide - the Boston Globe.'

[477] *Hair Nah* was recently exhibited, alongside other works by Momo Pixel, in the show *Game Changers: Video Games and Contemporary Art* (2020) at MassArt Art museum. The exhibition was curated by Dari Hanna, Assistant Curator, with assistance from Curatorial Intern Gina Linder and Curatorial Fellow Michaela Blanc.

> you don’t do that. It feels like they finally get to say no, ‘I’m telling y’all, get the fuck out my hair’.[478]

Through *Hair Nah*, Pixel makes visible experiences of frustration at the touching of hair and the invasion of personal space that is masked as curiosity. Further, through gameplay, Pixel creates an alternative response where there is an opportunity for black women to defend themselves against unwanted touching.[479] For Pixel, gaming is a medium of change and this is utilised in *Hair Nah* to address the issue as a form of storytelling with the ultimate goal of experiential learning through gameplay.[480]

*Hair Nah* is a simple online travel game that reflects the nostalgia for retrospective gaming devices and aesthetics that emerged in contemporary gaming in the early 2000s.[481] The 8-bit game features highly contrasting colours and a catchy synth soundtrack reminiscent of 1980s arcade games.[482] The overarching narrative of the game is captured in its tagline, ‘A travel game about a black woman who is tired of people touching her hair’ (Figure 4.3). In the introductory screen, the player is introduced to the protagonist avatar Aeva, whose travel plans are jeopardised by the constant invasion of her personal space by people wanting to touch her hair (Fig. 4.4). The player must select a travel destination for Aeva from one of three options: Osaka (Japan), Havana (Cuba) or Santa Monica Pier (California). The selection of the desired destination becomes the goal destination for the players, who must progress through three stages before they arrive.

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[478] Momo Pixel, cited in Brinkhurst-Cuff, ‘Meet the Creator of Viral Hand-Swatting Hair Game Hair Nah.’

[479] Although not a direct influence, a year earlier musician Solange released a song entitled ‘Don’t Touch My Hair.’

[480] Yeh, ‘The 8-Bit Viral Game Designer Pixelating Black Women’s Experiences.’

[481] Kohler, ‘Gimme! Nintendo Plays on Nostalgia with Tiny Retro 8-Bit NES.’

[482] 8-bit graphics showcase each pixel with 8-bits and the maximum number of colours displayed on the screen is 265. Games in the 1980s-1990s used 8-bit graphics. 8-bit graphics are still utilised by artists and game developers as an aesthetic choice, with greater resolution given the advances in technology. Although not in the scope of this thesis, it is useful to note that the use of 8-bit graphics as an artistic form in its own right is referred to as 8-bit art or pixel art.

**Figure 4.3.** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot by author.

**Figure 4.4** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of game narrative by author.

The game centralises the experience of black women through the creation and customisation of the avatar, Aeva. Before players enter the game, they are required to customise the avatar by selecting her tone of skin and hairstyle. Pixel strategically places parameters on avatar customization in the game that requires players of all genders and ethnicities to play as the black female avatar Aeva. The first customization is the selection of skin tone from six shades of brown, which are displayed to emphasise dark tones as the first option. For Pixel, this ordering of skin tones is deliberate, as she states, ‘I purposefully put the dark-skinned women at the top because the world often tries to place them at the bottom. That wasn’t going to happen in my game.’[483] (Figure 4:5a) Following the choice of skin colour the player is required to choose from one of twelve hairstyles common in black communities, including Bantu knots and locks (dreadlocks) (Figure 4.5b). Some of the options are modelled after African-American celebrities, such as box braids worn by actress Megan Good and the artist herself. Other inspirations for the hairstyle options include musician Solange’s afro and politician Maxine Waters’ bob haircut.[484] Similar to other games, customization in *Hair Nah* encourages identification with the avatar, and more broadly the experiences of black women.[485]

**Figure 4.5 a)** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshots of skin tone options by author.

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[483] Wheeler, ‘“hair nah is the video game version of “don’t touch my hair”.’

[484] Payne, ‘I'M a Black Woman and I'M Tired of People Touching My Hair,’

[485] Customisation of avatars in gaming can be grouped into three main types: functional, cosmetic and usability. Functional customization affects game mechanics and dynamics and directly affects individual game play. A key example of this is the customization of avatar skills. Cosmetic customization, such as avatar customization, is aesthetic and does not affect the game mechanics or dynamics but can contribute to player satisfaction. The last customization usability is changes that affect gameplay experience such as interface customization. In the game *Hair Nah*, the customizations are only cosmetic. See Turkay and Adinolf, ‘The Effects of Customization on Motivation in an Extended Study with a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game.’

**Figure 4.5 b)** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshots of hairstyle selections by author.

The gameplay of *Hair Nah* is relatively simple and involves the player swatting the unwanted touches of multiple hands of white people reaching to touch Aeva's hair. The game is structured as a journey of four stages that chart the avatar's attempt to make her flight and arrive at her desired destination. The first level of the game is the living room of Aeva's apartment, the second level is inside the cab on route to the airport, the third level is the airport security screening area, and the final level is inside the flight itself. Each level has two status bars on the left and right corner of the game interface: on the right the timer and on the left the 'Nah meter!'[486] At each level, the player is given sixty seconds to swat away hands using the left and right arrow keys to fill up the nah meter.[487] The level of the nah meter can be affected by missing a hand which will result in hair touching that the player is unable to stop for several seconds (See Figures. 4.6- 4.11). The player is able to progress to the next level once the meter is full, even if there is time remaining.

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[486] Status bars are common in videogames and are present on the screen during play. Status bars hold functional information for players that they use to operate in the game. Common status bar information includes health information, scores, weapons, supplies and maps. See Crick, 'The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,' 264.

[487] If the game is played on a phone or touch-screen, device swatting can be performed by tapping the right and left sides of the screen.

**Figure 4.6**. Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of instruction screen.

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**Figure 4.7.** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of level 1 in the apartment setting, by author.

**Figure 4.8.** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of level 2 in the cab, by author.

**Figure 4.9.** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of level 3 at the airport, by author.

**Figure 4.10.** Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of level four inside plane, by author.

*Hair Nah* is a single player game that inverts the third perspective camera to enable a frontal view of the avatar Aeva. Typically in third person perspective games, the camera is placed over the shoulder of the avatar and is linked to the avatar’s movements. In *Hair Nah* the perspective is fixed on the protagonist who is centralised on the screen facing outward, with her gaze returned to the player. This perspective creates a confronting encounter between the player and the avatar that evokes the formative encounter with the ‘other’ in Lacan’s mirror stage, as reframed by psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon. In Lacan’s mirror stage, an infant identifies with an external reflection of their whole body as an imago gestalt that represents for the infant an idealised ‘I,’ the basis of their subject-hood. In analysing the colonial racial schema in his seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon rewrites the mirror stage, as he states:

> When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely,

> only for the white man. The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self-that is, the unidentifiable, inassimilable. For the black man, as we have shown, historical and economic realities come into the picture.[488]

Fanon suggests that when a white person experiences the image of a black person, at first indexically and later as a photogenic object, it causes fear and rupture.[489] Conversely, the black person, upon seeing their own image, experiences their own blackness. As black hair is the extension of the black body, Pixel's choice of perspective makes visible the persistence of the black body as the racialised 'other' in the public sphere.

The denial of subjecthood for black bodies is described by Fanon as a 'crushing objecthood' of being seen only as a black body. African-American studies scholar Armani Morrison argues that, for black female bodies, the availability, inviolability and peculiarity was normalised under enslavement and exhibition.[490] These histories and Fanon's description of a 'crushing objecthood' and the process of objectification is built into the game mechanics and gameplay of *Hair Nah*. As the player progresses through each level of the game, the number and speed of hands extending to touch the hair of the avatar increases. If the player fails to swot away any hands, more extend towards the avatar resulting in a visual piling up of hands (See Figure 4.11). The repeated number of hands that extend towards the avatar reflects what African American scholar Armani Morrison describes as a 'scriptive thing,' as she explains:

> The touching of black women's hair reveals scripts of perceived exoticism and pedagogical obligation. These scripts draw upon a fundamental assumption: the black women are materially available to satisfy the intrigue of others.[491]

The gameplay highlights Morrison's concept of the script as performed behaviours that are seemingly executed under the guise of curiosity. This is reinforced by the soundscape of phrases repeated throughout the gameplay that are commonly addressed to black women in relation to their hair, such as; 'can I touch it?', 'is it attached to your head?', 'It's so fluffy' and 'nice.' The repetition of these audio-visual elements of gameplay communicates to the player the tiresome nature of these recurring experiences for black women.

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[488] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 161.

[489] In another passage, Fanon describes the encounter of a child who encounters a black person in public, who points out a 'negro' to his mother at first indexically, then in bemusement and soon fear. Fanon uses the term phobogenic object to refer to the stimulus that causes fear, in this case a black person.

[490] Morrison notes that touching has been used as a method to assess the authenticity and worth of black bodies historically, citing the poking and prodding of the flesh of slaves by prospective owners before purchasing. Morrison, 'Black Hair Haptics: Touch and Transgressing the Black Female Body,' 86-67.

[491] Morrison, 87-88.

**Figure 4.11**. Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of the cab with multiple hands touching the avatar's hair, by author.

While the gameplay emulates the experience for non-black women, it is also intended to be a form of affirmation of the experiences and visibility of black women. Communication and media scholar Tia Tyree commented that *Hair Nah* also affirmed the black experiences of women, as she states:

> Whenever you see yourself in something, you understand that you are important…For those who have typically been excluded from a crowded market place like the video game arena, when you see yourself, you see that someone cares enough to represent you.[492]

At the end of each level, Pixel includes screens of text that celebrate the success of the player or, on the occasion where the player has failed, the text-based screens deliver messages of encouragement or empathy. The messages which are accompanied by a small black female avatar who employs colloquial language and phrases such as 'come thru Melanin! You better show out' and 'welp, moisturise and try again' (Figure 4.11 and 4.12). These comments reflect Pixel's own intention to create an opportunity for black women to laugh but also to defend themselves and to 'fight back' against invasions of personal space and privacy.[493]

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[492] Nasir, 'Online Game to Players: Don't Touch Black People's Hair.'

[493] Gomez, 'Momo Pixel made a Video Game to Remind You that You Can't Touch Her Hair. Here's Why.'

**Figure 4.12**. Momo Pixel, *Hair Nah* (Online game, sound, colour), 2017. Screenshot of the final scene by author.

In *Hair Nah,* Pixel also utilises the mechanics of the game as a medium for change and transformation, which is addressed at the completion of the game. When a player successfully completes all four stages, the avatar Aeva is finally able to take the flight and reach the desired destination. To mark the successful completion, a screen with scrolling text appears congratulating the player and pointing out the temporary nature of their experiences and the persistence of this experience for black women. Pixel alludes to this in the last stage of play in a hidden detail of an elderly black woman who sits in the second row of seats on the plane her head resting in her hand in exhaustion (Figure 4.10).[494] The frustration and tiredness of the elderly figure is expressed by Pixel in the final unfiltered sentence that call for a stop to these transgressions against black women.[495] The viral reception of the game generated widespread discourse that created visibility of the frustration and experiences of black women. The popularity of the game, coupled with its ongoing availability online, highlights its continued potential to raise awareness and effect social change through gameplay.[496]

### 4.8 Extimate avatars and political commentary

The use of games as a medium for collective action and transformative play are also utilised as a vehicle for the delivery of political comment by contemporary artists and game developers. Game scholar and game designer Ian Bogost, in discussing the use of video games for politics, activism and advocacy, suggests that these games are procedurally expressive. Procedurality in computing refers to the core practice of software authorship; as he states, ‘Software is comprised of algorithms that model the way things behave. To write procedurally, one authors rules that generate many instance of the same type of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself.'[497] Gaming and the mechanics of gameplay is an example of what Bogost describes as 'rule-based models,' capable of producing different outcomes that conform to the overall guidelines. In relation to the use of gaming as political commentary, Bogost notes that the commentary is embedded within the rules themselves; hence games are able to enact multiple historiographies or political positions as 'rules of interaction.' Further, Bogost draws on the historical methodology of Jared Diamond that looks beyond recording specific events to examine the 'configurations of material conditions and ask[s] how they produce political, social and expressive outcomes.'[498]

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[494] Momo Pixel, ‘hair nah’

[495] In an interview, Momo Pixel shared that she was asked to make the final sentence more palatable to white audiences. Pixel shares that the alternate phrase ‘we’re not mad at you’ was suggested. Yeh, ‘The 8-Bit Viral Game Designer Pixelating Black Women’s Experiences.’

[496] *Hair Nah!* generated approximately 218,000 unique pageviews, 175,000 game plays, 70,000 social shares, 911 million impressions, 50 YouTube reaction videos, and 80+ press write-ups within two months of launching. Wieden and Kennedy, ‘W+K: Hair Nah.’ [not in bibl]

The concept of extimacy is useful to frame the engagement between the player and avatar within political and historic genre games. Gaming and gameplay via a computer-interface create an opportunity for what Nusselder describes as an imaginary self-representation, where the 'inner self' and the 'outer-self' coincide. Further, he states, 'By picking an avatar (erotic, aggressive, animal-like …) I can formalize certain tendencies that remain otherwise dark and obscure.' [499] Within the context of political games, the choice of the avatar as the 'outer-self' can be utilised as the medium through which to express and explore political perspectives or actions by the player. The political impact may extend beyond the actions of the avatar of the game, as Bogost suggests:

> Playing such games can have a political impact because they allow players to embody political positions and engage in political actions many will never have previously experienced, and because they make it possible for players to deepen their understanding of the multiple causal forces that affect any given, always unique, set of historical circumstances.[500]

### 4.9 Modding history through artist-made game mods

The term 'modding' is a colloquial term that describes the practice of game modification by tech-savvy fans using software and editing tools released by the commercial gaming industry. Modding has resulted in new user-created additions to established games, including tweaking storylines and narrative arcs as well as the creation of new games, which contribute to the participatory culture of online gaming and the proliferation of user-created content online.[501] For artists creating game mods based on historical or political events, the process of modding opens up new possibilities for representation, as noted by game designer Katie Salen:

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[497] Bogost, 'Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism and Advocacy.'

[498] Bogost

[499] Nusselder, 'Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology,' 134.

[500] Bogost, 'Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism and Advocacy.'

[501] Unlike other participatory cultures and user created content that emerged in the age of mobile internet, modding moves fluidly between professional production and amateur content. As mentioned, modding has close ties to the commercial gaming industry that create technological affordances for technically savvy 'amateurs.' Postigo also notes that commercial companies incorporate modding into their business models. Postigo, 'Modding to the Big Leagues: Exploring the Space between Modders and the Game Industry.'

> Many artist mods, like Jodi's, are more mods of game engine technology than they are of the games themselves. The interest is not in modifying game play, but in modifying the representational space. Spaces once designed for player interaction, in fact spaces that only gained meaning through interaction, are transformed into spaces to be seen and watched, rather than played.[502]

Beijing artist Feng Mengbo utilises the practice of modding to create games that emphasize a political reading by the game players. Since the early 1990s, Mengbo has embraced the aesthetics of modding by drawing on the materiality of video games, such as the first person shooter game *Doom* and the fighting game *Streetfighter*, and strategically inserting political iconography from China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This methodology extends into his creation of interactive mod video game installations, created by modifying open source codes of commercial games, such as the first-person shooter game *Quake III Arena.* Mengbo is often described as an artist of the Political Pop art movement that emerged in the period following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, which is considered a critical turning point in Chinese cultural and intellectual history. In 1989, curator and critic Li Xianting coined the term Zhengzhi bopu (Political Pop) to describe a contemporary art movement that emerged in the 'post-New Era' of China, which was characterised by the rise of consumerism and commercial production and the expansion of mass media and popular culture.[503]

Political Pop is characterised by the combination of political symbols of the Mao era with the symbols of Western consumer culture to create a feeling of irony and absurdity.[504] Chinese art critic Gu Chengfeng identifies four key aspects of Pop Art by referring to the standards of Western Pop art to the conditions of China:

> 1) The great use of visual signs so familiar to the public that they are tacitly understood. These signs may simply be depictions of readymade objects or may involve some sort of formal alteration.
>
> 2) The search for metaphors in reality. Satiric allegory extends beyond glorifying culture. It often uses the canvas to unleash a certain defiant mocking of authority.
>
> 3) Departures from traditional aesthetic categories. The degree of a work's success is determined by how well it express its [underlying] concepts.
>
> 4) Graphic simplicity and quick execution. By abandoning a sense of the eternal, [Pop] pursues efficacy for a given period of time.[505]

Although Mengbo has disavowed the association of his work with the Political Pop movement, his work resonates with two of the characteristics of the movement. Within his broad visual vernacular,

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[502] Katie Salen cited in Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 108.
[503] Lu, 'Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China,' 114-116.
[504] Li Xiating cited in Safronova, 'An Analysis of the Video Game Works of Feng Mengbo,' 119-137.
[505] Chengfeng,'Tendencies in Chinese Pop,' 171.

Mengbo employs icons and symbolism of the Cultural Revolution, which he often combines with his exploration of new media specifically video games.[506]

### 4.10 Gamed Histories: Long March: Restart, 2008-2011, Feng Mengbo

*Long March: Restart* (2008) is an interactive art video game installation that forms the culmination of a body of works that began as a set of drawing entitled *Game: Over Long March* (1994). This body of works explored the history and mythology of the year-long massive military retreat from the Chinese Nationalist Party army by the Chinese Communist Party's Red Army under Mao Zedong.[507] The Long March refers to the retreat of the Red Army, which marched for 370 days travelling over 6000 miles through harsh terrain, enduring climatic changes and many armed conflicts. Film scholar Corradi Nerri argues that the Long March has always had strong symbolic value in linking the south and north of the country, and as the definitive marker of the control of Mao Zedong. Amongst Chinese communist leaders, the endurance of the Long March symbolised Mao Zedong's ability to 'survive at all odds.'[508] Through the medium of video games, the nationalistic mythology of the Long March is 'gamed,' and the sacrifice of the revolutionary troops are paralleled in the sacrifice of the virtual characters in the game.[509]

*Long March: Restart* is a game mod that modifies several classic games, including *Street Fighter* (Capron, 1987) *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1985), *Doom* (id software, 1993) and *Teenage Mutant Ninjas* (Konami, 1989).[510] Visually, the game harks back to the two-dimensional aesthetic of its arcade gaming referents, which is reinforced by the immersive soundscape of revolutionary songs rendered in the style of 8-bit gaming music. The video game installation is comprised of two large screen projections set up on parallel walls creating an immersive hall-like space for visitors to engage and interact with the work as players or as spectators (Figs 4.13 and 4.14). Players use a game pad to play the game, which is projected on one screen as a zoomed-out image. On the other opposite screen is an enlarged projection of the game play. The game uses side scrolling technology used in popular side-scroller games such as *Super Mario Bros* where the screen moves with the avatar. However, the sheer scale of the work often inverts this movement and, in some instances, the player and spectators are chasing after the avatar.

*Long March Restart* is a platform game that follows a single avatar, a little Red Army Soldier who fights through battles under Chairman Mao's command, using crushed Coca Cola cans as explosives.[511] As is the nature of platform games, the Red Army Soldier must jump and run from platform to platform to reach a final destination, which in the game is Tiananmen Square. The game is comprised of twelve levels that include a Great Wall scene, a traditional aristocrat's house, a swamp with mutant monsters, a winter scene, a suspension bridge, a Chinese city, a factory, the Red Square in Moscow, a Statue of Liberty scene and two versions of Tiananmen square.[512] Each level is a visual mashup that includes political images, mutant machines, monsters and communist symbols including the Red Star, the hammer and sickle, and PRC slogans. A prominent motif across the levels is the presence of the Coca-Cola can as the weapon of the avatar and as a pattern on the floor of several scenes. The prominence of Coca-Cola references the Post New-Era period of China, as Coco-Cola was the first consumer product introduced in 1979 after China reopened its doors. It is used in the game as a reference to China's modernisation and influences from the West.

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[506] Safronova, 'An Analysis of the Video Game Works of Feng Mengbo' 124; Chengfeng, 'Tendencies in Chinese Pop,' 171-172.

[507] Jim, 'Mao Goes Pop Online: Game Art Worlds in China,' 249.

[508] Neri, 'Is the Long March a Dream? Imagination, Nationalism and Multiple Declination of a Real Mythology,' 273.

[509] Neri, 280.

[510] Safronova, 'An Analysis of the Video Game Works of Feng Mengbo,' 120; Jim, 'Mao Goes Pop Online: Game Art Worlds in China,' 249.

[511] Jim, 249.

As a single-player, third-person perspective game, the interactive component invites the player to participate in Mengbo's representation of the history of the *Long March*. The absence of avatar customisation options forces the player to adopt a particular position within the game narrative as a Red Army Soldier. In the course of gameplay, the player encounters a jumbled cast of characters, including Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and ray-shooting American astronauts. Within these encounters, Mengbo reverses the roles of existent video game characters such as the iconic Mario from Mario Bros, a known 'good guy' who is revealed in this game as a villain. Through design, Mengbo's role reversal, where it is difficult to tell the 'good guys' from the 'bad guys,' is a juxtaposition that alludes to the relationship between the East and West. Mengbo deliberately subverts these symbols and icons to create the possibility of questioning history and generating new meaning or perspective, as illustrated by critic Kevin Holmes:

> *[Long March: Restart]* takes imagery a modern tech-savvy audience is well-acquainted with and subverts it, giving it a Communist twist while imbuing it with nostalgia from a different time and place. In marrying the iconography of Communism and Capitalism, Mengbo is jabbing at both ideologies and their tendency to use the 'hero' ad a means of promoting their propagandist agendas. Highlighting their similarities, he unites them in the anything-goes world.[513]

In the gameworld that is a mashup of fictional and historical avatars, Mengbo creates the opportunity for players to contemplate the power dynamics between the East and the West. Further, through gameplay, he creates a space for historical narratives of Communist China with impunity in the safe environment of the game.

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[512] Safronova, 'An Analysis of the Video Game Works of Feng Mengbo,' 121.

[513] Holme, 'The Long March: Restart Gamifies Communist China.'

**Figure 4.13.** Feng Mengbo, *Long March Restart* (Videogame, sound, colour), 2008-2011. Screenshot.

**Figure 4.14.** Feng Mengbo, *Long March Restart,* 2011. Installation view.

Since the beginning of mobile technologies, artists and game developers have explored the artistic and creative potential of games. The interactive art games addressed in this chapter demonstrate the ways artists utilised gaming as a medium through which to process the phenomena of everyday life. Through the materiality of gaming, which encompasses conceptual and formal design processes, the artists in this chapter highlight the centrality of the figure of the avatar as a performed entity. As addressed by Alan Kwan, the first-person gaming function creates an extimacy that allows a player to embody and inhabit the avatar and to experience emotions that draw on their own embodied memories. The correlation between embodied offline and online lives through the player as avatar framework is indicative of the much wider online activities and engagement. Through the work of Momo Pixel, this chapter examined the correlation between online and offline activism and the notion of play as a form of activism. Through gameplay, Pixel demonstrates the transformational potential of gaming as a medium to address the extimate encounters with the notion of a racialised body. This is echoed by the work of Feng Mengbo, who utilises the process of modding to create opportunities to engage and explore different political and historical perspectives. Through the materiality of gaming and game mechanics, the artists and game developers in this chapter frame the avatar as a performed entity that is activated through play. Further, they highlight the possibilities of gaming as a medium and the trope of the extimate avatar as a vehicle through which to reflect, process and influence the realities of everyday life.

## 5. Indigenous Avatars

Since the beginnings of the World Wide Web (www), the adoption of the avatar and digital forms by Aboriginal and Indigenous artists has mirrored the efforts of their communities to create self-determined representations. This chapter examines the work of Indigenous artists who employ the trope of the avatar and the materiality of digital platforms to create extimate forms of Indigeneity. In this chapter, the artist's specific tribal and ethnic affiliations are prioritised; however, terms such as 'Aboriginal,' 'First Nation' and 'Indigenous' are also used throughout the chapter. While all of the terms refer to indigeneity, this chapter uses them as they are employed by the artists or specific tribes or ethnic groups. These general terms recognise that local Indigeneity is connected to a global collective consciousness amongst first peoples in similar positions.[514] This chapter charts the short art history of Indigenous and Aboriginal self-determined communities and spaces online to contextualise the work of artists within an indigenous public sphere. This chapter critically examines works by three Indigenous artists Skawennati (Kanien'kehá:ka, Canada), Rachel Rakena (Ngā Puhi and Ngāi Tahu, Aotearoa) and Leah King-Smith (Bigambul, Australia). Collectively, these artists create a new framework for the avatar that draws on Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous concepts of space, place, relationality and subjectivity. These artworks contribute to a much broader cultural project of 'Indigenising' digital platforms and the trope of the avatar. This chapter will employ several decolonial concepts, including 'de-linking,'  the Māori concept of the pae and the Aboriginal philosophy of dreaming to address notions space, negotiation and systems of relationality. As will be illustrated in this chapter, the works by these artists create new forms of extimate Indigeneity by inserting a level of materiality that reconfigures and re-contextualises the trope of the avatar within an Indigenous framework.

### 5.1 Indigenising – a definition

Central to this chapter is the term 'Indigenising' a project that Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes in two dimensions. The first involves non-Indigenous activists and scholars, and the second a project of Indigenous peoples. According to Smith, the first dimension of 'Indigenising' is centring Indigenous landscapes, images, metaphors, themes and stories and, in the process, disconnecting the 'cultural' ties between the settler society and its metropolitan homeland. This dimension aligns with the process of decolonisation. The second dimension prioritises the rights of Indigenous peoples and draws upon traditions and bodies of Indigenous knowledge and values. It has a dual dimension as she states that it 'centres a politics of Indigenous identity and Indigenous cultural action.'[515] This dual dimension is grounded in alternative world views and value systems that draw freely on other critical approaches but privilege Indigeneity. Decolonisation is part of the larger Indigenous project; however, some scholars have disagreed with this component of the larger Indigenising project because of its reliance on colonial discourse.[516]

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[514] Garneau, 'Toward Indigenous Criticism: The Ah Kee Paradox.'

[515] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*,146.

[516] Cairns, 'Decolonise Or Indigenise: Moving Towards Sovereign Spaces and the Māorification of New Zealand Museology.'

### 5.2 Indigenising a way of seeing - *Etuaptmumk* - Two-Eyed Seeing

Indigenising as a two-dimensional, but related concept and process can be illustrated as a form of extimacy that operates as an edge between intimacy and exteriority and Indigeneity and non-Indigeneity. As already discussed, Pávon Cúeller suggests that extimacy follows an edge structure that can be described as a Mobius-strip continuum. The Mobius-strip continuum cannot be oriented to a single point and is twisted so that it offers a view of the psychic inside and outside. It can also be employed to describe the cultural position between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as noted by Fornssler et al.:

> A Mobius strip is a one-sided, continuous closed surface… The pathway of the strip is an infinite loop, always twisting and returning movement back to its origin, and in turn encouraging reflection on how the seemingly two sides co-create each other. This is a model for respecting difference while retaining separate identities…[517]

Further, the Mobius-strip can be utilised as a metaphor to frame the work of Indigenous artists, which follows the definition offered by Brazilian sculptor Lydia Clark. She defines the concept of Mobius space as a 'succession of paradoxical relationships to be directly experienced in the body. Her proposition acknowledged the coexistence of opposites within the same space: internal and external, subjective and objective, metaphorical and literal, male and female.'[518] This definition can be extended to Indigenous artists' work who utilise Indigenous knowledge, technologies and digital materiality to co-create forms of extimate Indigeneity.

In Canada, the Mobius-strip has been utilised as a metaphor in relation to the application of 'Two-Eyed Seeing,' an Indigenous concept introduced by Mi'kmaq Elders, Albert and Murdena Marshall from Unama'ki. 'Two-Eyed Seeing' is a philosophical concept that recognises the distinct and whole nature of the Indigenous 'eye' (worldview) and that of the western 'eye' (worldview).[519] Elder Albert acknowledges Two-eyed seeing as 'weaving back forth' between eyes as reflected in his comments:

> Two-Eyed Seeing is the gift of multiple perspective treasured by many aboriginal peoples and explains that it refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.[520]

The notion of weaving back and forth enables agency to weave back and forth between Indigenous and Western epistemologies and methodologies, as required. Further, it evokes the metaphor of the Mobius-strip as a continuum between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that opens up new modes of communicative exchange across cultures.[521] Fornssler et al. emphasise the dynamic contours of the Mobius-strip as turning and twisting, allowing for new affinities and thinking without subsumption.[522] The philosophy of two-eyed seeing and the metaphor of extimacy as a Mobius-strip can be utilised as a framework for Indigenous artists fluidly drawing on Indigenous knowledge and digital materiality.

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[517] Osthoff, 'Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica: A Legacy of Interactivity and Participation for a Telematic Future,' 282.
[518] Osthoff, 282.
[519] Bartlett, Marshall and Marshall, 'Two-Eyed Seeing and Other Lessons Learned within a Co-Learning Journey of Bringing Together Indigenous and Mainstream Knowledges and Ways of Knowing,' 335.
[520] Bartlett, Marshall and Marshall, 335.
[521] Bartlett, Marshall and Marshall, 14.

### 5.3 Indigenous public spheres as a form of extimacy

The concept of extimacy is reflected in the work of Indigenous artists, communities, tribes and nations to Indigenise the internet and its functions as a new public sphere.[523] The notion of the internet as part of the Indigenous public sphere builds on German sociologist Jurgen Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere' as a realm of social life granted to all citizens, where public opinions can be formed. Further, he states, it is enacted in 'every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.'[524] While Habermas' concept has been debated for its normative conceptualisation, it has also been utilised in relation to media as a central institution of politics and idea-formation and the 'locus of the public sphere.'[525] In the age of social media and the networked participation it promotes, the internet has been increasingly framed as an emergent public sphere. The framing of the internet as a public sphere has taken a more functional perspective that stresses the transformative power of new technologies. Yochai Benkler and Rauchfleisch and Kovic emphasise the internet as a public sphere and an interactive network of communication.[526] Zizi Papacharissi suggests a departure from Habermasian public sphere to trends of public impulses and desires. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green highlight the process of exchange in relation to video-sharing platform YouTube, describing it as a new cultural public sphere that encourages cross-cultural encounters and development of political listening across different belief systems and identities.[527] These formations of public visibility illustrate Nancy Fraser's notion of the existence of multiple spheres, described as 'a form of public life in which multiple but unequal publics participate.'[528]

This chapter contextualises the work of Indigenous contemporary artists who create extimate avatars in relation to the Indigenous public sphere. Hartley and McKee (2000) state that the 'Indigenous public sphere' describes the highly mediated public space for developing notions of Indigeneity.[529] They propose a dialogic model that maps a 'universe of Indigeneity' as it has been formed and reformed in relation to Australia:

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[522] Fornssler et al., 'Travelling the Möbius Strip: The Influene of Two-Eyed Seeing in the Development of Indigenous Research Accomplices,' 300-301.

[523] The public sphere builds on Jurgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere, which has been contested by scholars for its normative conceptualization of the public sphere. Many scholars who have drawn on his work as a baseline, however, explore more functional definitions that focus on what the public space is and what it does.

[524] Habermas, Lennox and Lennox, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964), 49.

[525] Hartley and McKee, *The Indigenous Public Sphere: The Reporting and Reception of Indigenous Issues in the Australian Media, 1994-199*7, 4.

[526] Rauchfleisch and Kovic, 'The Internet and Generalized Functions of the Public Sphere: Transformative Potentials from a Comparative Perspective,' 3.

[527] Burgess, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture,* 77.

[528] Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,' 70.

[529] Hartley and McKee, *The Indigenous Public Sphere: The Reporting and Reception of Indigenous Issues in the Australian Media, 1994-1997*, 5.

> A central feature of our approach is that it takes the relations between Indigeneity and media to be 'dialogic' in mode… So Indigeneity 'speaks' to media studies. Equally, Indigenous people are far from passive recipients of media representations. They are themselves media producers, and are active participants in the processes of media production, dissemination, regulation, reception, and innovation. So Indigenous people 'speak' to media. At the same time, it is clear that media coverage is vitally important to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike – Indigeneity is a 'semiotic hot spot' of contemporary Australian political and cultural life.[530]

As defined by Hartley and McKee, this dialogic relationship between Indigenous peoples and media is not solely the preserve of Indigenous peoples. They propose that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians 'speak' to each other through media coverage of Aboriginal affairs, suggesting that the Australian public sphere is being 'indigenized' (sic). [531]

Australian scholar Michael Meadows offers another definition of the Indigenous public sphere as being distinct from the mainstream and a response to its lack of representation. While he acknowledges that an Indigenous public sphere can be perceived as peripheral to mainstream media, he challenges the notion of the public sphere as 'a single, all-encompassing Indigenous public sphere.' Instead, he embraces Fraser's notion of multiple public spheres, arguing:

> …we should think in terms of a series of the existence of parallel and overlapping public spheres – spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds engage in activities of importance to them. Each of us simultaneously has membership of several different public spheres, moving between and within them according to desire and obligation…Although they develop in close proximity to – and with a great deal of influence from – mainstream society, they should be seen as discrete formations that exist in a unique context as the product of contestation with the mainstream public.[532]

For Meadows, an Indigenous public sphere encompasses a form of cultural resistance to mainstream media and instead focuses on Indigenous modes of cultural production. The Indigenous public sphere includes what he describes as appropriating community-based media, such as radio, television, and new media technologies.[533]

Both definitions of an Indigenous public sphere illustrate the different dimensions of the Indigenising project described by Smith. These different yet interrelated approaches to the Indigenous public sphere are illustrated in the work of contemporary Indigenous artists who engaged with social media, computer-mediated communication and digital platforms in the age of mobile internet.[534] These works, which are discussed in greater detail as case studies in this chapter, chart an evolving dialogue between Indigenous peoples and social media. They demonstrate the ways in which the materiality of the internet is used as a formative space that allows artists to 'articulate their own discursive styles and formulate their own positions on issues.'[535] This also created the opportunity for artists to formulate new forms of Indigeneity by employing the trope of the extimate avatars. As Meadows argues, these processes and interactions 'highlight the importance of seeing the notion of Aboriginality, or identity formation, as a dynamic process which takes place through discourse.'[536]

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[530] Hartley and McKee, 6.
[531] Hartley and McKee, 6.
[532] Meadows, 'Journalism and Indigenous Public Spheres,' 37-38.
[533] Meadows, 37.
[534] This decade is largely signalled as starting in 2007 in relation to the widespread release of smartphones.

### 5.4 Indigenising cyberspace through extimate avatars and virtual communities

Indigenising new digital spaces through new extimate avatars can take many different forms. As discussed in Chapter One, in relation to social networking websites, the new circulation of content allowed for the extension of cultural identities through new modes. Gestures such as *skins* and graphic backgrounds of profile pages were forms of personalisation and artistic efforts to 'Indigenise' their online avatars. This approach to creating an Indigenous extimate avatar as part of a connected network predates social media and mobile internet. Since the release of the World Wide Web (www), online communities have thrived through various forms. [537] The use of centralised web pages and different communication technologies, including private chat spaces and later graphical pictures and avatars, allowed for new forms of community to emerge. Computer-mediated communication re-conceptualised the notion of 'community' from being nationally, geographically, historically or politically located to being symbolically 'imaged and imagined' through shared cultural practices.[538] In writing of virtual diasporic Indian communities, scholar Anandra Mitra elaborates on his use of 'imaging and imagining' communities online:

> community was a construct based on the way the members imagine their relations with each other, and produce an image of themselves that would provide the basis for the internal workings of the community and provide a 'face' for the community to the outside world.[539]

The inner workings of the online community include the shared purpose, norms, practices and language that characterise the group. Further, they create for themselves a public 'face' and exteriority that reflects their collective distinctiveness. While many new communities formed online, this was also an opportunity for existing Indigenous and ethnic communities to extend and redefine themselves in a new place.

For existent Indigenous and ethnic groups, the internet and computer-mediated communication provided new possibilities for community and nation that does not rely on geographical proximity. Mitra argues that diaspora communities cannot be defined in traditional terms such as spatial proximity; instead, these communities are characterised by shared practices, experiences and language. For diaspora individuals, newsgroups and electronic communication systems, earmarked for specific nationalities and communities within nations, became alternative means to 'imagine' these communities.[540] Here, Mitra argues how the internet can be used as a medium and tool:

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[535] Meadows, 'Journalism and Indigenous Public Spheres,'38.
[536] Meadows, 38.
[537] Maloney-Krichmar, Preece and Abras, 'Online Communities, History Of,' 3.
[538] Mitra, 'Nations and the Internet: The Case of a National Newsgroup, 'Soc.Cult.Indian',' 44-45.
[539] Mitra, 45.

> The electronic communities produced by the diasporic people are indeed imagined connections that are articulated over the medium of the Internet, where the only tangible connection with the community is through the computer which becomes a tool to image and imagine the group affiliation.[541]

The 'image and imaging' of an online community in the early 1990s were mainly textual, and introduced practices of 'posting' information, including mages and later sound. The interactive components, which were largely text-based immersed individual users within a 'discursive space.' As Mitra argues, the empowered agency of an individual to participate and interact in the discursive space means that identity and community are formed around the shared discourses of its members.[542]

Online communities based on offline ethnicity and national identities often showcased the mobility of notions of place, local culture and social and cultural boundaries. These were often articulated in the discourses of its members but also in the visual images of the websites themselves. In the mid-1990s, Pacific websites such as *Rotumanet, Planet Tonga* and *Polycafe* helped bridge geographically dispersed communities into a central home page. These home pages extended the notion of 'homeland' as an information gateway to access news and information about the physical homeland. It also became a site for sharing and disseminating cultural knowledge through interactive computer-mediated communications, such as uploading photographs, posting to bulletin boards and text-based chat forums. Visually, these websites also imaged 'real homeland' places through sharing photographs of the land, maps and flags in their graphic designs (Figure 5.1).

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[540] Mitra,   46-47.
[541] Mitra, 46-47.
[542] Mitra, 46-47.

**Figure 5.1.** *Planet Tonga* (Website), 7 April 2000. Screenshot taken from Internet Archive.

The technological affordances of websites also created new opportunities for redefining the gender politics of dialogue and discourse within communities. This occurred in several discussion forums that emerged in the 1990s amongst Pacific Island diaspora communities, such as *Kava Bowl Forum* (KB) created by communications director Taholo Kami (Figure. 5.2).[543] As indicated by the logo that features an image of a kava bowl, the discussion forum presented a new (online) space for dialogue beyond traditional cultural domains such as *fono* (meetings) and kava drinking circles. These contexts for dialogue, particularly the kava circle, are often highly proscribed and have certain exclusivity.[544] In the Kingdom of Tonga, the kava circle is reserved for men and is a site where political and social issues are discussed, and information is shared. These gatherings are critical sites of influence and, as ‘Ofa Guttenbeil argues, ‘influence the thinking, and possibly the majority of the voting decision in the nation.’[545] The recreation of an online kava circle through a discussion forum allowed for a more democratic dialogue to occur that transcended these cultural restrictions. This also gave voice to the negotiation of different cultural experiences; as Kami states, '…these (cyber) spaces are creating a different sort of conversation for Pacific Island diasporas who find themselves caught between identities'. [546]

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[543] Kava Bowl was part of the communications company Kami Communications, owned and operated by Kami. Pacific Islands Report, ‘Taholo Kami From Tonga Shows The Way of the Internet.’

[544] Women and young men are often excluded from these forums. Helen Morton, ‘Islanders in Space: Tongans Online,’ 235.

[545] Guttenbeil, *Advancing Women's Representation in Tonga*, 162.

**Figure 5.2:** Kava Bowl Forum (Website), 1999. Screenshot from Internet Archive.

### 5.5 Creating Indigenous place and belonging in contemporary art through discourse

The impact of technologies such as computer and cyberspace can be seen in the expansion of language to create terms that situate these technologies firmly within a cultural framework. In Te Reo Māori, the language of Māori (the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand), a new compound word was created to expand the language to encompass new phenomena and technologies. The Te Reo term for computer (and its internet access and applications) is 'rorohiko,' which draws on the analogy of two existing words 'roro' meaning brain, and 'hiko' meaning spark or 'electricity,' literally translated to mean 'electric brain.'[547] Art historian Jonathan Mane-Wheoki notes the term 'hiko' is used to describe natural phenomena of atmospheric electricity as a manifestation of supernatural power that is dangerous and capricious.[548] Mane-Wheoki acknowledges its adaptation to encompass new technologies as they were being adopted in marae (complex), from the electric lightbulb to communication technologies such as facsimile, email and satellite dishes, which linked even the most remote Māori settlements into a 'global telecommunications network.'[549]

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[546] Taholo Kami quoted in Franklin, 'I Define My Own Identity,' 469

[547] Boyce, 'Languages in Contact I : Creating New Words for Maori,' 16.

[548] Mane-Wheoki, 'Toi Hiko: Maori Art in the Electronic Age,' para 10.

[549] Mane-Wheoki, para 12.

This new global telecommunications network and rorohiko (computers) created new opportunities for a cohort of Māori artists emerging through tertiary fine arts education. The incorporation of computer literacy in fine arts education can be attributed, in part, to the development of personal computers.[550] The introduction of computers into fine arts institutions also enabled computers to be used as creative mediums. For example, in 1988, the Dunedin School of Art received funding from the Department of Education to purchase 8 Commodore Amiga 2000 computers, which enabled computer graphics to be taught as a subject within the school.[551] Amongst the cohort of students at Dunedin School of Art were a number of Māori artists who were exploring the (then) cutting edge technologies and possibilities of computer art. Writing in the late 1990s, Mane-Wheoki notes that young Māori artists were using rorohiko as both a tool and medium to create works, including word-processing statements, making still and moving images and as a mode of communication.[552] Further, he locates the use of rorohiko within an Indigenous art history of adaptation and innovation, as he states:

> …they are nevertheless the living descendants of their ancient ancestors. In exploring new media as they arise, the present generation of Māori artists, driven by curiosity, is doing what their tohunga whakairo forebears did when metal tools were first introduced to this country-acculturating and indigenising the new technology for creative and expressive purposes.[553]

### 5.6 Toi Rerehiko – A new digital and electronic art form

Rachel Rakena (Ngāi Tahu, Ngā Puhi) is amongst the early cohort of Māori art students who studied in the computer art programme of Dunedin School of Art. In her Masters thesis, Rakena proposes and names the umbrella term 'Toi Rerehiko' to describe art forms that are immersed in Māori tradition, tikanga and values that employ digital and electronic media as tools and medium. The term 'rerehiko' meaning electronic, is a play on the term 'rorohiko' for computer and is used by Rakena in an expansive manner to describe moving image and other works that employ digital and electric components. Further, the term also encompasses methodologies and principles that emerge from the medium and Te Ao Maori (the Māori world), as she states:

> Toi Rerehiko's native medium would utilise digital and electronic technologies. The principles of this form should encompass concepts of continuum. Immersion, movement, space and the meniscus or pae. It should be in continual fluid process connecting and belonging. Rather than dispossessing artists who exist in the 'space between' or 'ambivalence' of their heritage, Toi Rerehiko centres and claims digital space for Māori.[554]

Within this framework, Rakena proposes using Indigenous spatial concepts and terms such as 'pae' for exploring cyberspace and digital medium within a Māori cultural context.

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[550] Mane-Wheoki, para 13.
[551] Tomlin, Lonie and Schmidt, 'Dunedin School of Art: A History,' 120.
[552] Mane-Wheoki, 'Toi Hiko: Maori Art in the Electronic Age,' para 15.
[553] Mane-Wheoki, para 17.
[554] Rakena, 'Toi Rerehiko,' 59.

Rakena draws on two key spatial concepts in her practice. The first is the notion of pae that describes a form of Indigenous extimacy. Rakena draws on the concept of pae defined by Māori artist and scholar Robert Jahnke as a zone of demarcation and negotiation.

> The pae has retained its intrinsic cultural dimension as margin, boundary and horizon. It is the critical area of interaction between sky and land, and between people and people. It is a conceptual zone that positions host and visitor. It is the locus of power that mediates relationships between people, defines spatial zones of communication and establishes the order of social interaction.[555]

In his illustration of the concept of 'pae,' Jahnke refers to several examples, including the paepae āwhā, which locates the border between the landscape and architecture and the paepae tapu that delineates the threshold between the outside of the house and the inside.[556] The latter example marks the spiritual realms between deities Tūmataunenga (god of war and mankind) and the realm of Rongomatāne (god of cultivation and peace). According to Jahnke, the allocation of Māori deities to external and internal spaces prescribe the discourses, rituals and behaviours permissible in each area.[557] Further, Jahnke asserts that crossing the pae may require ritual negotiation between one side and the other, which is regulated by discourse generated by the shifting parameters of social interaction that condition the protocol of the various Māori groups. The shifting parameters allow the pae to be responsive to change, mediating boundaries between tribes and cultural systems and protocols.  Jahnke's description of pae resonates with the notion of extimacy, in that it proposes a relational approach to notions of the interior and exterior.

The dynamic nature of the pae as a transitional space is dynamic and constantly in movement and negotiation between interior and exterior. In combination with the concept of the pae, Rakena draws on Rangihiroa Panoho's temporal framework of the continuum to replace the binary between traditional and contemporary Māori art. For Rakena, the notion of continuum encompassed new 'culturally and technologically hybrid relationships, acknowledging and connecting with outside influences.'[558] For Rakena, the continuum allowed for a more holistic understanding, as she states: 'Therefore the "continuum"' serves to connect and relate cultural, spatial and temporal notions, rather than dividing them.'[559] Rakena extends this notion of continuum by proposing a water-based model of a 'puna' (spring) drawing on its outward flow as a metaphor for encounter and engagement with outside influences and agendas.[560] Rakena's model of a puna evokes the notion of extimacy and the metaphor of the Mobius-strip, where the outside and inside, Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies and technologies are continuously co-creating each other.

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[555] Jahnke, 'Voices Beyond the Pae,' 12.
[556] Jahnke, 12.
[557] Jahnke, 12.
[558] Rakena, 'Toi Rerehiko ' 52.
[559] Rakena, 52.
[560] Rakena, 48.

The model of the puna can be seen across a body of works that Rakena created in the early millennium, which explores the impact of communication technologies on her Kāi Tahu iwi (tribe).[561] In these digital installations, Rakena utilised the metaphor of the sea and water to describe cyberspace as a fluid, non-land-based place where communication occurs. These works challenged the concept that Kāi Tahu identity, and more broadly Māori identity, is founded solely on 'turanga' (standing place) where you stand on land.'[562] In this body of work, she uses the visual imagery of water and being immersed within it as an amniotic metaphor, as she states:

> This space allows for relationships across terrains where the issue of identity lies not so much in geography but in the development of communities in fluid spaces that are both resonant with cosmological and genealogical narratives, whakapapa and belonging, and responsive to contemporary technologies.[563]

For Rakena, cyberspace was a new realm of the cosmos in which her Kai Tahu identity already existed. Further, the shifting and flowing imagery of water was a metaphor for a contemporary Kai Tahu collective identity that encompasses tribal narratives and 'relationships to the sea, foreshore and iwi-online.' [564]

### 5.7 Rerehiko creating a new communication environment

This body of work emerges from Rakena's participation in the Kāi Tahu Whanau group in the early 2000s. Kāi Tahu Whanau is a tribal-based group that began as a university student group and emerged through the Māori studies department at Otago Polytechnic.[565] Group membership began with students and several Māori staff and elders, all of whom were Ngāi Tahu mana whenua (Indigenous people who have territorial rights over the land). In later years, the group membership widened to include mātāwaka (Māori of other tribal areas) and Pākēha (people of European descent).[566] The group met weekly through kapa haka (performing arts) gatherings and wānanga (seminars or conferences), held at different Mārae where members learned different cultural practices, such as making pōha (bull kelp containers), mokihi (rafts) and writing waiata (songs).[567] Between the physical gatherings, the main mode of communication amongst the Kāi Tahu Whanau group was email. Email communication was used to share information from wider iwi and hapū amongst the group, and sending lyrics for waiata haka (war dances) as well as photographs.

Rakena's works utilised the digital materiality of Kai Tahu Whanau group emails in a series of digital installations that explore how these modes of communication have influenced Māori culture. The first installation *as an individual and not under the name of Ngāi Tahu* (2001) demonstrated the ways in which emailing was utilised as a pae for group negotiation (Figure 5.3). Amongst the Kai Tahu

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[561] Kai Tahu also referred to as Ngāi Tahu is an iwi (tribe) located in Te Waipounamu (South Island). Te Rūnanga o NGĀI TAHU, 'Ngāi Tahu-the iwi.'
[562] Reweti, 'Uiuinga #3: A Conversation with Rachael Rakena.'
[563] Rakena, 'Toi Rerehiko,' 48.
[564] Rakena, 4.
[565] Kāi Tahu whānau became an Incorporated Society in 2000/1.
[566] Rakena in conversation with the author, 11 September 2020.
[567] Reweti, 'Uiuinga #3: A Conversation with Rachael Rakena.'

Whanau, it was common to carbon copy members of the group, transforming the email into a discursive space for dialogue. For Rakena, the practice of carbon copying emails held a similar function to forms of social media, allowing members to track what was happening. It also extended the notion of the pae as a space of collective decision making, where resolution is found through dialogue in cyberspace.[568] Within this work Rakena translates cyberspace as the space of communication into a pool of water, with kapa haka performers immersed and existing within it.

The title of the work is an excerpt of an email thread related to a Ngāi Tahu newsletter, which included an article about a pōha wānanga that was organised by a member of the Kāi Tahu Whanau and incorrectly attributed to the larger Ngāi Tahu tribe. Upon reading this email, a member of the group emailed asking who gave the organiser permission to share the wānanga with the wider public. The organiser replied, 'Before you get your knickers in a twist, I applied for funding as an individual and not under the name of Ngāi Tahu.'[569] This quote, which also titles the work, speaks to the negotiation and distinction between an individual and collective identity. Emails provided the medium for members to express their views on issues of access to Indigenous knowledge and how it should be shared. In the same manner, email also provided the medium for the members to resolve these issues as a collective dialogue. The significance of a collective resolution was demonstrated in the inclusion of documentation footage of the pōha wananga shown on a monitor alongside the work. This footage was also collectively edited by the Kai Tahu Whanau.

Rakena uses this specific email dialogue as digital material in the installation, taking excerpts of email text as running script, overlaying two figures immersed in water. By filming the text on a CRT monitor, Rakena captures the texture, patterns of pixels of emails, striations and flickering caused by the monitor, and camera frequencies. The emails are utilised as a structural component of what Rakena describes as a 'digital whare,' referring to traditional Māori meeting houses. She describes the text within the underwater world as a new form of virtual tukutuku (ornamental latticework), stating:

> The digital text of the email and its aesthetic of pixelated patterns create the new tukutuku for the wharenui [ātea] in cyberspace in which a community often meets. This evocative blend makes visible the living culture of the contemporary iwi on email as emotions, life, death, business, language, ideas, culture, gossip, humour, panui, and information korero.[570]

The reference to cyberspace as a wharenui (communal house) and emails as tukutuku presents the creation of community as extimate forms of tribal identity and belonging. For Rakena, emails as forms of tukutuku highlight their value as signifiers of meaning and as 'signifiers of things Māori in Cyberspace.'[571]

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[568] Reweti, 'Uiuinga #3: A Conversation with Rachael Rakena,'

[569] Rakena in Reweti, 'Uiuinga #3: A Conservation with Rachael Rakena.'

[570] Rakena, 'Toi Rerehiko ,' 3-4.

[571] Rakena, 4.

**Figure 5.3.** Rachael Rakena, …*as an individual and not under the name of Ngāi Tahu* (Single channel 4:3 SD Video, Sound, Colour), 2001. Still.

The use of water as a metaphor for cyberspace also helped to contextualise the work within a specific Indigenous reality or, more specifically a Ngāi Tahu reality. In *Rerehiko* (2003), Rakena created a digital installation comprising two screens projected opposite each other to create an immersive viewing that mirrored the imagery of the work. In this work, male and female members of Kai Tahu Whanau, dressed in black clothing and white plastic piupiu (waist gaments), were immersed in a five-metre dive pool and performed haka, taiaha (staff) and waiata movements. Similarly to earlier works, email texts are overlaid, creating the image of the performers swimming through and performing within an exchange of emails (Figures 5.3 and 5.4]) The accompanying sound was also taken from the emails, which are read aloud, creating a narrative arc that follows the email exchange between members of the Kai Tahu Whanau. The dual screens echo this idea of exchange and dialogue that incorporates multiple voices, expressions and perspectives as expressed through the email text.[572]

The email text documents a 24-hour exchange between members about whether the Kai Tahu Whanau would perform in the upcoming Hui-ā-tau, the annual Ngāi Tahu hui (meeting). In response to the initial email, a member replied, 'How many people in Kāi Tahu Whānau anyway? It might not be a duet, but it won't be much more.'[573] This response sparked a number of responses that also surfaced intertribal tensions and critical perspectives around gender. This was evident in one response that stated, 'Well if Kāi Tahu men were reliable enough to turn up, we wouldn't have to rely on a backrow of Ngā Puhi.' Others expressed offence and highlighted issues of miscommunication, as evidenced in the response from the member who first emailed, stating, ‘I’m offended that you all took my email one the wrong way, and you didn’t realise it was tongue-in-cheek…’[574] Resolutions were also present in the email exchange, including several apologies for miscommunications and a formal mihi (acknowledgement) in Te Reo Māori that re-asserted the values and identity of the group.[575]

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[572] Rakena in conversation with the author 11 September 2021.
[573] Rakena in Reweti, 'Uiuinga #3: A Conversation with Rachael Rakena,'

**Figure 5.4.** Rachael Rakena, *Rerehiko* (Multi-projection video environment), 2003, Christchurch Art Gallery. Installation view.

### 5.8 Creating Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace as Extimate Places

The utopianism that surrounded ‘cyberspace’ assumed a new democratic space that transcended the realities of the physical world.[576] However, as illustrated in the work of Rakena, the mobility of notions of place, identity and cultural practice allowed for the extension of ‘real’ communities formed in relation to real places. Neil Blake Christiansen, in his research of Inuit and Arctic websites, noted that rather than dissolve physical boundaries, cyberspace was used in ways to construct clear boundaries. This was created visually through images of the Inuit and Artic environment, aerial photos of physical communities, and through images of paintings, carvings and prints made by Inuit artists. Other imagery was also used to assert and maintain boundaries. For example, Christiansen notes the use of physical maps of land to claim areas that Inuit negotiators have struggled and fought for. As a form of Indigenising cyberspace, these examples collectively visualise a 'place' that is 'asserted in cyberspace and in physical space.'[577]

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[574] Reweti, ‘Uiuinga #3: A Conversation with Rachael Rakena.’

[575] Rakena, ‘Toi Rerehiko ’ 23

[576] Lisa Nakamura argues that internet users were prone to see experiences as post-racial and were able to ‘pass,’ by creating avatars that were taken for normative/white/male. See Nakamura, ‘The Socioalgorithmics of Race: Sorting it Out in Jihad Worlds,’ 151; Nakamura, *Cybertypes Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet,* 31-33.

The notion of cyberspace as a utopia also assumed a discrimination-free space, without gender, race, age or disability, premised on the notion of the physical absence of the body online. However, as scholar Lisa Nakamura revealed in her research of textual and graphic chat rooms, such as *LambdaMoo*, Time Warners' *The Palace* and Avateer's *Club Connect*, race is articulated through language and visual depictions of avatars – both textual and graphic.[578] In early text-based chat rooms, race was articulated through textual descriptions if a user decided to incorporate race as part of the physical description of their avatar. Later in graphic chat rooms, avatars allowed for varying degrees of visibility that enabled race to be articulated visually, as Nakamura observed:

> …here race is constructed as a matter of aesthetics, or finding the colour you like, rather than as a matter of ethnic identity or shared cultural referents. The fantasy of skin colour divorced from politics, oppression, or racism seems to also celebrate it as infinitely changeable and customisable: as entirely elective as well as apolitical.[579]

The aesthetic emphasis of race enabled what Nakamura describes as 'identity tourism' that allowed individuals to appropriate race in a recreational manner without any risks of being that race offline.[580] Conversely, in the instances where race was not constructed through textual or graphic treatment, the avatars assumed a 'default whiteness and maleness.' According to Nakamura, this was a result of the digital divide at this time, when internet users were predominately male and white.[581]

Cyberspace, as a new utopian space, was also met with a degree of caution by Indigenous scholars and artists. Cree and Métis filmmaker and critic Loretta Todd, in her essay *Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace*, raised several issues and considerations regarding the relationship between Indigenous peoples and 'cyberspace.' Todd highlighted issues with the disembodied nature of cyberspace from an Indigenous perspective, as she states:

> The aboriginal view expresses how all life is interconnected; there is no disconnection from the material world. The transformation that is a regular experience in native narratives is not like the experience of escapism in western narrative nor the disembodiment of cyberspace.[582]

For Todd, the disembodied nature of cyberspace discarded the body, its lived reality and interconnectedness with mind, land and place. This argument framed cyberspace as antithetical to Indigenous knowledge, which is interdependent, further reinforced by her provocative question 'would we [Indigenous peoples] have created cyberspace?' Todd offers a response to her question stating, 'I think not – not if cyberspace is a place to escape the earthly plan and mess of humanity'.[583]

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[577] Christensen, *Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline, Identities Online*, 67.
[578] Nakamura, *Cybertypes. Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet,* 37.
[579] Nakamura, 53.
[580] Nakamura, 40.
[581] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, 13-14.
[582] Loretta Todd, 'Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace,' 182.

The dangers of cyberspace as a new frontier was also highlighted in Todd's essay where she suggests that it may in fact be a guide for neo-colonialism by tracing its militaristic roots.[584] The rhetoric used to describe cyberspace as a new space to be discovered and inhabited had a strong imperial tone.[585] Scholar Mikhel Proulx stated that the implications of metaphors of movement and spatiality recall the American Manifest Destiny frontier attitudes and the conception of land as terra nullius (void or empty land), which led to its occupation and imposed sovereignty.[586] Further, it also asserted sovereign rights over Native peoples and their governments without their knowledge and consent.[587] Metaphors utilised to describe cyberspace such as the 'electronic frontier,' and applications such as 'Explorer,' reinforced these historical associations. These histories of encounter provided a framework of caution and scepticism around cyberspace and the central concern expressed by Todd of whether native world views could find a place in cyberspace.

### 5.9 CyberPowWow: An Aboriginally Determined Territory in Cyberspace

Indigenous artists embracing new digital technologies in the 1990s were, at the same time as Todd's essay, exploring the cultural and aesthetic potential of cyberspace with a cognisance of the dangers and issues outlined by Todd. Kanaka Maoli scholar Jason Edward Lewis and Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) artist Skawennati, in the article *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*, drew parallels between cyberspace and the 'New World' by European explorers. According to Lewis and Skawennati, these encounters continue to 'haunt' the assumed 'blank' space of cyberspace, arguing:

> But if Aboriginal peoples learned one thing from contact, it is the danger of seeing any place as *terra nullius,* even cyberspace. Its foundations were designed with a specific logic, built on a specific form of technology, and fast used for specific purposes (allowing military units to remain in contact after a nuclear attack). The ghosts of these designers, builders, and prime users continue to haunt the blank spaces.[588]

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[583] Todd, 'Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace,' 182.

[584] Todd, 180

[585] Proulx, '*CyberPowWow*: Digital Natives and the First Wave of Online Publication' 210.

[586] Proulx, 210.

[587] The Latin concept terra nullius was based on the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal principle employed by English and American colonial law and the American and State federal governments. Ruru and Miller identify three basic aspects of American Manifest Destiny and argue that they arose directly from elements of the Doctrine of Discovery. They identify them as: 'First that Manifest Destiny assumes the United States of America has unique moral virtues. Second, Manifest Destiny asserts that the United States has a mission to redeem the world by spreading republican government and the American way of life around the globe. Third, Manifest Destiny has a messianic dimension because it assumes America has a divinely ordained destiny to accomplish these tasks. This type of thinking could only arise from an ethnocentric view that one's own government, culture, race, religion and country are superior to others. This same kind of thinking justified and motivated the development of the Doctrine of Discovery in the fifteenth century and then created Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century.' Miller and Ruru, 'An Indigenous Lens into Comparative Law: The Doctrine of Discovery in the United States and New Zealand,' 872.

[588] Lewis and Fragnito, 'Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace,' 30.

Lewis and Skawennati acknowledge the digital divide and the technological barriers, such as HTML coding, that challenged the notion of democratic access. However, they also acknowledge that amongst the early adopters who were able to access and learn HTML coding were a number of Indigenous peoples, who learned how to use the programming technology needed to 'build in the blank spaces.'[589] Lewis and Skawennati are amongst this early cohort of Indigenous peoples who were able to build Indigeneity into the blank spaces of the World Wide Web to create 'aboriginally determined territories in Cyberspace.'

The *CyberPowWow* project, with its tagline 'An Aboriginally Determined Territory in Cyberspace,' is a key example of artistic efforts to assert Indigenous sovereignty in cyberspace during the early stages of the web (Figure 5.6). *CyberPowWow* was first conceived in 1996 as a part website and chat space that formed a virtual gallery with site-specific digital artworks and a library of texts.[590] Conceived by Skawennati, the project was supported by *Nation to Nation*, an artist collective she co-founded with Ryan Rice (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Eric Robertson (Gitksan). *CyberPowWow* was online from 1997 to 2004 in four iterations: *CyberPowWow, CyberPowWow 2, CPW 2K: Cyber powwow Goes Global*, and *CPW04: Unnatural Resources.*[591] Each iteration was also an event that marked new work being added to the site, functioning as a virtual 'opening.'[592] Since its inception, the project aimed to create an Indigenous public sphere online to challenge stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples and networking technologies and, in doing so, shaped the World Wide Web. In the third iteration of *CyberPowWow,* Skawennati writes about these dialogues:

> CyberPowWow started off as a virtual exhibition and chat space that would dispel the myth that Native artists didn't (or couldn't!?) use technology in their work. In addition to that, we wanted to claim for ourselves a little corner of cyberspace that we could nurture and grow in the way we wanted. After two iterations of CyberPowWow, the question of whether Native artists could be digital artists was answered: of course we can.[593]

*CyberPowWow* was hosted in graphic Multi-User Domain *The Palace* by Time Warner that created access to graphical chat room servers. Graphic user domains such as *The Palace* evolved from the text-based Multi-User Domains, allowing users to visually customise the environments and to create and inhabit avatars. Avatars communicated 'face to face' with other avatars via chat bubbles that appeared on the screen, creating what Gaertner suggests is a 'bodily presence to the chat room space.'[594] Avatars on *The Palace* were able to inhabit a series of interconnected rooms or 'palaces' with graphical backdrops that represent social spaces such as hotel lobbies and lounges.[595] Given the decolonising agenda of the *CyberPowWow* project, the name of the software was not lost on the artists either, as Skawennati states: ‘With its allusions to royalty, colonialism and hierarchy, it can sometimes be a problematic name for a bunch of Indians who are trying to stake a claim in the territory of Cyberspace.’[596] However, she clarifies that the choice of *The Palace* was largely technical for its user-friendliness and its customizability that artists could upload to and inhabit.[597]

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[589] Lewis and Fragnito, 'Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace,' 30.
[590] Lewis and Fragnito, 30.
[591] Gaertner, 'Indigenous in Cyberspace: CyberPowWow, God's Lake Narrows, and the Contours of Online Indigenous Territory,' 56.
[592] CyberPowWow, 'About.'
[593] Fragnito, 'A Chatroom is Worth a Thousand Words.'
[594] Gaertner, 'Indigenous in Cyberspace: CyberPowWow, God's Lake Narrows, and the Contours of Online Indigenous Territory,' 56.
[595] Gaertner, 56.

*CyberPowWow* and its iterations can be considered an extension of the practice of urban powwow. Indigenous studies scholar Jay T. Johnson defines urban powwow as opportunities to assert native identity within a temporary setting; as he states, urban powwow create a ‘temporary place – a transitory manifestation of Native identity within what can frequently be a Native-unfriendly environment.’[598] Johnson’s definition of the urban powwow as an environment resonates with the creation of *CyberPowWow* as an aboriginally determined space within the vast networks of *The Palace.* Similarly to urban powwow, the online iterations of *CyberPowWow* enabled manifestation of native identities through the graphic chat service and the organisation of ‘gathering sites’ offline across Australia, Canada and the United States of America.[599] The gathering sites paralleled the gatherings of *CyberPowWow* and ensured that people were gathering in real places to experience *The Palace* together, assist each other and socialise and network over food (Figure 5.5). Further, the gathering sites also addressed the digital divide by providing internet and computer access to those who did not have their own. Curator Candice Hopkins (Tlingit) described her participation in these gatherings sites as having constant reminders of real places, experiences and identities. The importance of connection to ‘place’ was also echoed when she logged onto *The Palace* and was asked where she was located and where she was from. These examples and the persistence of place in the *CyberPowWow* paralleled the practice of powwow as a pan-tribal event that affirms Indigenous identities.[600]

The pan-tribal nature of *CyberPowWow* online and the physical gathering sites across multiple venues embedded digital networks within distinct first nation cultures and within local contexts.[601] Both gatherings offered opportunities to create and affirm new social and Indigenous networks online, using the cultural platform of the powwow as a hub and a communicative public arena. Anthropologist Renya K. Ramirez describes the powwow as ‘hubs,’ gatherings that support the creation of Indigenous cultures, community, identity and belonging within a network of relationships across space.[602] While powwows are used to affirm common experience and identities, they are also a communicative public arena where differences are acknowledged and negotiated.[603] This latter definition of the powwow is paralleled by *CyberPowWow,* which provided a hub for Indigenous peoples online and offline. Furthermore, the socialisation in the gathering site and through the graphic chat of *The Palace* provided a public communicative arena for dialogue and negotiation.

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[596] Fragnito, ‘A Chatroom is Worth a Thousand Words.’
[597] Fragnito.
[598] Johnson, ‘Dancing into Place: The Role of the Powwow within Urban Indigenous Communities,’ 277.
[599] Gathering sites are artist-run centres, public galleries and educational institutions that opened their computer rooms to the public for one day, so that it was easier for people to participate in CyberPowWow. The gathering sites were designed to be welcoming and comforting places where people could access computers and the Internet in a social setting. Cyber Pow Wow, ‘CPW2K-Sites.’
[600] Hopkins, ‘Making Things our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital Storytelling,’ 43.
[601] Proulx, ‘*CyberPowWow*: Digital Natives and the First Wave of Online Publication / *CyberPowWow*: Les Autochtones À L’ère Numérique Et La Première Vague De Publications En Ligne,’ 203.
[602] Ramirez, *Native Hubs*, 59.
[603] Mattern, ‘The Powwow as a Public Arena for Negotiating Unity and Diversity in American Indian Life,’ 184.

**Figure 5.5** Photograph of *CyberPowWow* Gathering Site, Oboro, Montreal, 1997
Brenda Dearhouse Fragnito, Kathleen Dearhouse, Jasmine Dearhouse.

### 5.10 CyberPowWow and extimate Indigeneity

Each of the iterations of *CyberPowWow* can be considered a self-determined ‘territory’ online for Indigenous peoples at a formative time of the web. The adoption of new technologies by Indigenous artists highlighted their cultural potential, as noted by Plains Cree artist Archer Pechaswis, Co-curator of *CyberPowWow 2K*: ‘We saw the Internet not just as a new technology but a new territory, one that we could help shape from its inception.’[604] The new networked spaces created an opportunity for Skawennati and the participating artists to extend the existent concept of territory. Indigenous territory, also referred to as ‘traditional territory,’ alluded to the social, cultural, economic and linguistic relationship, both ancestral and contemporary, of Indigenous peoples to a geographical area.[605] Legally, the concept of ‘territory,’ as defined in 1989 in *Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization on Indigenous Tribal Peoples*, recognises the cultural and spiritual importance of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their lands, and establishes their rights to ancestral lands.[606] By demarcating an Indigenous space within *The Palace, CyberPowWow* extended the concept of territory to a new (virtual) space, shaping and indigenising the graphic chatrooms.

As a new Indigenous territory, *CyberPowWow* employed the pan-tribal powwow gathering as the model for creating an Indigenous pan-tribal place in cyberspace. Whilst ceremonial at its core, the modern powwow has evolved into a significant social, cultural and economic movement amongst

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[604] Pechawis, ‘Not so Much a Land Claim.’
[605] Malone and Chisholm, ‘Indigenous Territory.’
[606] International Labour Organisation, ‘C169-Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No.169).’

Native North American communities.[607] Powwows are important tribal gatherings where people gather to socialise, wear tribal regalia, and perform dances, as well as buy Indigenous foods and merchandise. At the core of the modern powwow is a series of intertribal dances in different styles, organised around a designated and consecrated arena.[608] The ground for each powwow is laid out according to a preconceived blueprint, which creates a consecrated performance space that is blessed by elders of each community. Johnson states that powwow creates ‘temporary bounded native places’ through participation in the powwow, the consecration, embodied dance and drum, and through the gossip and conversation of the audience, creating a place where the living and non-living come together. Despite the temporary nature of powwow in urban settings, they represent an intentional form of place making. It is a conscious attempt to be together in a place and to foster community, identity and belonging within tribal and non-tribal lands.

*CyberPowWow* and powwow offline, particularly those within urban non-tribal settings, follow a similar process of native place-making that employs the concept of extimacy. Powwows that take place in physical space occur in a demarcated circle and follow a circular spatial arrangement. Mark Mattern, in describing powwow circles of Indians of Minnesota and Western Wisconsin, states that the circle is an ‘embodiment of all living creatures, and relations within this circle are characterised by unity, harmony, and inclusiveness.’[609] Johnson also argues that, within this circular spatial arrangement, some participants include spirits as the outermost ring of the powwow circle, enabling participants to connect with an ancestral past. Furthermore, he argues this spatial format allows participants to transcend the linear time structure of settler state cities.[610] The demarcation of the powwow circle as an embodiment of Indigeneity and Indigenous world views is a form of extimacy that problematises the binary distinctions between outside-inside, subject-object and past-future. [611] As geographer Paul Kingsbury argues, extimacy involves ‘how the heart of our being, the locus of our most treasured feelings, can be radically externalised, that is, transferred onto things that are beyond us.’[612] The blueprint of the powwow circle and its unifying symbolism is an example of a radically externalised and thus extimate form of Indigeneity, created in physical space.

Urban powwow, particularly within non-tribal lands and contexts, is evidence of the fluidity and mobility of Indigenous cultures and the centrality of extimacy. The temporary demarcation of powwow in urban contexts creates a ‘native place’ with a distinct purpose, as argued by Johnson:

> By demarking the powwow dance area with ceremonies that create ‘blessed ground,’ one makes a distinct purpose and place from what might otherwise be a basketball court within a large urban area.[613]

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[607] Powwow can also be competitive where dancers compete for cash prizes. DesJarlait, ‘The Contest Powwow Versus the Traditional Powwow and the Role of the Native American Community,’ 115-127.
[608] Johnson, ‘Dancing into Place: The Role of the Powwow within Urban Indigenous Communities,’ 221.
[609] Mattern, ‘The Powwow as a Public Arena for Negotiating Unity and Diversity in American Indian Life,’ 185.
[610] Johnson, ‘Dancing into Place: The Role of the Powwow within Urban Indigenous Communities,’ 225-226.
[611] Kingsbury, ‘The Extimacy of Space,’ 246.
[612] Kingsbury, 246.
[613] Johnson, ‘Dancing into Place: The Role of the Powwow within Urban Indigenous Communities,’ 226.

In a similar process, *CyberPowWow* utilised this demarcation of space within *The Palace* to create a distinctly Indigenous space within what would otherwise be an open graphic chat room. In the inaugural iteration of the project, six artists were invited to create work for the website. It was launched as a distributed chat event where participating artists, writers and the public at large were asked to log on at the same time and discuss the works on display. Skawennati and Lewis acknowledge it was successful in bringing Aboriginal art to a public venue.[614]

**Figure 5.6**. *CyberPowWow2* (Digital Image), 1999.

This issue of 'non-participants' was resolved in the second iteration of *CyberPowWow 2,* 1999, which launched a separate Indigenous Palace (Figure 5.6). *CyberPowWow2,* as a separate and distinct space of Indigeneity, and parallels the creation of powwow circles within urban spaces. In this iteration of the project, eight artists and writers customised the chat space with imagery, scripts and a selection of Indian avatars, which will be explored further below. The demarcation of an exclusive Indigenous virtual palace operated as a powwow circle is best reflected in the virtual Round Dance by Lori Blondeau (Cree/Salteux/Métis).[615] In this virtual round dance, Blondeau used Palace software to shrink the participants' avatars to a single pixel to maximise the space of the chatroom. As participants entered, they followed the artist and circled the space to music embedded in the chatroom by Blondeau.[616] The shrunken digital avatars performing in the chat space helped to translate the traditional dance form into what Gaertner describes as a new 'urban territory.'[617] Within this new online urban territory, the artists championed the use of the avatar as a mode of engagement and for the transmission of Indigenous knowledge.

### 5.11 CyberPowWow and Indigenous avatars

The *CyberPowWow* project created hubs that embedded the digital networks and the trope of the avatar firmly within Indigenous cultures and local specificities. Initially, on *The Palace* avatars were limited to a series of generic smiley faces that could be customised through the addition of props such as a hat and a pair of sunglasses. In 1997, *The Palace* avatars evolved into digital paper dolls that could be customised using the websites prop editor. The evolution of digital paper dolls, colloquially referred to as 'dollz,' were comprised of a body in three parts (head, torso and legs) and could be dressed with up to six props of clothing and accessories. *CyberPowWow 2* embraced the new visual possibilities of avatar dollz in the creation of 'Indian' avatars. The artists experimented with expressing their tribal and ethnic identities through the creation of 'Indian' avatars. Diversity of ethnic avatars were encouraged in *CyberPowWow* 2, created from a range of imagery including images of plastic cowboys and Indian figurines, cartoons and photographs of real people.[618] The use of existent photographs was a process described by Skawennati as the ability to 'build their own worlds and interject themselves…their actual bodies- into them.'[619]

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[614] Lewis and Skawennati, 'Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace,' 30.

[615] Gaertner, 'Indigenous in Cyberspace: CyberPowWow, God's Lake Narrows, and the Contours of Online Indigenous Territory,' 63.

[616] Gaertner, 63.

[617] Gaertner, 63.

**Figure 5.7**. Skawennati's avatar 'xox' visiting 'The Gallery' room, featuring artworks by Ryan Rice, Bradlee LaRocque and Melanie Printup Hope, including a sculpture, painting and shockwave animation, *CyberPowWow*, 1999. Screenshot.

Despite real bodies and imagery being able to be uploaded online, Skawennati acknowledged the issue of authenticity in relation to Indigeneity within *CyberPowWow*. As anyone could wear 'Indian avatar,' this created opportunity for appropriating race and ethnicity or as what Nakamura describes as 'identity tourism.' In response to this, the artists proposed problematising the notion of authenticity, as described by Skawennati:

> …well how are people gonna know who's native and who's not in this palace? You're all wearing avatars, we can't tell, you know? And so our response, because I worked with other artists, was let's just--let's just put a whole bunch of native avatars in there. And so we threw in ~~um, you know~~, "Stereotypical Native Person" like~~,~~ one that was a woman who had won Miss Native America…We had all these different things, even pictures of ourselves and ~~we~~

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[618] Skawennati quoted in transcript 'Fem Tech Net – The New School.'

[619] Fragnito in Gaertner, 'Indigenous in Cyberspace,' 57.

> ~~had~~ smiley faces.  We just thought: let's just trouble this idea or play with this idea of who's native and how you can tell that they're native.[620]

This critical form of identity play or interrogation is reflected in the evolution of Skawennati's avatar *xox*, from the stereotypical Miss Native America to Tank Girl avatar utilised in *CyberPowWow 2K* (Figures 5.7 and 5.8). This iteration of the avatar xox uses an image of the antihero Tank Girl wearing native dress, war paint and a feather from the 1995 film of the same name which is based on the British post-apocalyptic comic series. Skawennati's use of this image as the avatar highlighted a parallel appropriation of race known as 'redface,' occurring beyond cyberspace and within the circulation of popular culture.

**Figure 5.8.** Still image of the character Tank Girl in Indian regalia used by Skawennati as her avatar xox, 1995. Film still from *Tank Girl*.

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[620] Skawennati email correspondence with author, 27 January 2020.

**Figure 5.9** Skawennati's avatar xox visits a chat room created by Jason Edward Lewis for *CyberPowWow 2K,* 2001. Screenshot.

Within *CyberPowWow*, the critical identity-play of creating 'Indian avatars' is a pioneering example of the use of the avatar as a new tool for Indigenisation and agency. As Skawennati states of the intention to populate the project:

> We wanted all kinds of Indians. There were avatars made from photos of friends (so, *real* Indians!), some made of those little plastic cowboys-&-Indians toys, cartoons (I think!) and then people dressing as Indians, like my Tank Girl av[atar].[621]

Skawennati's comments reflect the significance of this aspect of the project, and her later works address the stereotypical framing of Indian identity that denies Indigenous heterogeneity. The Indian avatars, which were also available for other participants to adopt, can be understood as an intervention into what art historian Jolene Rickard describes as 'de-racialised space.'[622] Within the exclusive Indigenous space of *CyberPowWow*, these avatars took on new political significance as visual symbols of Indigeneity and of the active participation of Indigenous peoples in shaping the Internet.

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[621] Skawennati email correspondence with author 27 January 2020.

[622] Rickard, 'First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed.' http://www.cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/jolenework.html

### 5.12 Extimate Indigeneity and De-linking

Extimate forms of Indigeneity online, such as the demarcation of space and the creation of Indigenous avatars, have also been utilised by contemporary Indigenous artists to 'de-link' from colonial histories and representations. The method of delinking is a critical part of the decolonial theory of sociologist Alibal Quijano and later developed by philosopher Walter D. Mignolo. Quijano's theories of decoloniality draw on his distinction between colonialism and coloniality. More specifically, he describes colonialism as a direct and formal political, social and cultural domination by Western European societies.

> In the beginning colonialism was a product of a systematic repression, not only of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination, while at the same time the colonisers were expropriating from the colonised their knowledge, specifically mining, agriculture, engineering, as well as their products and work. The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns and instruments of formalised and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural. These beliefs and images served not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated, but also as a very efficient means of social and cultural control, when the immediate repression ceased to be constant and systematic.[623]

The ongoing impact and effects of colonialism are the most general form of domination that Quijano defines as 'coloniality.' Further, he argues that despite the fact that colonialism as an explicit political order has 'ending,' this does not necessarily 'exhaust, obviously, the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination between peoples.' [624] To demonstrate the persistence and manifestation of colonial views, he points to the utilisation of African sculpture serving as the source of inspiration for Western artists but not as a mode of artistic expression of its own or as an equivalent art form.

Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking and practice that responds directly to the modes and processes of coloniality. Latin America scholar Catherine Walsh defines decoloniality as a 'form of struggle and survival, an epistemic and existence-based response and practice – most especially by colonised and racialised subjects – against the colonial matrix of power in all of its dimensions, and for the possibilities of an otherwise.'[625] Decoloniality encompasses concepts, approaches, methodologies that preceded and began colonialism, but also seeks to undo hierarchical structures and make visible perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework.[626] For Quijano, the decolonial task necessitates an extrication ‘from the linkages’ between rationality/modernity and coloniality. As he states:

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[623] Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,' 169.

[624] Quijano, 170.

[625] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality,* 26-28.

> The alternative then is clear: the destruction of the coloniality of world power. First of all, epistemological decolonisation, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communications, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another relationality.[627]

Quijano used the term ‘Desprenders’, which means epistemic de-linking or epistemic disobedience. Further, it allows for the epistemic reconstitution of other positionalities, languages and ways of being and knowing that were previously disavowed.

Mignolo describes the process of delinking as the process that enables decolonial shifts and, in turn, brings other epistemologies to the foreground.[628] For Mignolo, delinking as a process of decoloniality requires a change in the terms and content of the conversation. Further, he argues that one strategy is to ‘de-naturalise concepts and conceptual fields that totalise a reality.’[629] These definitions of delinking in praxis are a useful framework for the methodologies of extimate Indigeneity, pioneered by contemporary artists engaging with the materiality of internet applications and technologies. In earlier projects such as *CyberPowWow*, artist Skawennati created a critical foundation of delinking modes that foregrounded Indigenous epistemologies and positionalities. This work is critical in providing the terms and content for further opening up of new perspectives and positionalities. As Walsh argues of decoloniality:

> Decoloniality…is not a static condition, an individual attribute or a lineal point of arrival or enlightenment. Instead, decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought.[630]

### De-linking through avatars in *TimeTraveller™*

*TimeTraveller™* (2013-2018) is a nine-episode machinima series created in the virtual world of Second Life by artist Skawennati. The machinima series reimagines the past and an Indigenous future through the trademarked edutainment system *TimeTraveller™* used by the protagonist characters Hunter and his love interest Karahkwenhawi. The series follows Ratorats ‘Hunter’ Dearhouse, a Mohawk bounty hunter living in Montreal, Quebec, in 2121, who wishes to learn about his ancestors through his virtual headset and logging into his edutainment system *TimeTraveller™*. Through his virtual headset, Hunter travels across 600 years of history from pre-Columbian America to his present in 2121. The science-fiction narrative revisits factual histories, immersing the character in historical events, including the Minnesota Massacre in 1875, the Occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 and the Oka Crisis in 1990. The narrative moves fluidly between past and present and projects hypothetical futures, such as the competition Manito Ahbee Powwow in Winnipeg in 2112. Skawennati asserts an Indigenous positionality and agency within these histories that de-links from the dominant colonial narratives through her Indigenous avatars.

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[626] Mignolo and Walsh, 26-28.
[627] Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,’ 177.
[628] Mignolo, ‘Delinking,’ 454.
[629] Mignolo, 459.
[630] Mignolo and Walsh, 49.

*TimeTraveller™* exists as a machinima series on a dedicated website that exists in the 'present' and is designed to promote twenty-second century *TimeTraveller™* sunglasses and edutainment system.[631] The machinima series can be accessed via this website; however, it's presented as a reality TV series of the protagonist Hunter. The website also features information about how to buy the *TimeTraveller™* technology, an FAQ page and merchandise such as t-shirts via the store. The website also allows visitors to 'tell a friend' by sharing a link via email. The mixed reality of the project also extends to social media, specifically Facebook, where the female protagonist Karahkwenwahi has a profile page kept by Skawennati, and who also has friends in the real world.[632] This profile page features the machinimagraph of the avatar as the profile photograph and includes her date of birth and place of study. The profile page also extends the narrative and engagement of the machinima through uploaded photographs, updates and links (see Figure 5.10).

**Figure 5.10.** Karahkwenwahi Facebook profile page, 2021. Screenshot by author.

*TimeTraveller™* followed a similar methodology to the earlier project *CyberPowWow* by creating an exclusive Indigenous space within *Second Life* and producing machinima works. Following *CyberPowWow,* Skawennati and Lewis co-founded Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace research network (AbTeC) which they describe as an 'Aboriginally determined research-creation network.'[633]

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[631] TimeTraveller 'TimeTraveller™'

[632] Skawennati intended to utilise this Facebook page to develop a game based on the narrative of Karahkwenwahi looking for Hunter. The page is still active; however, it has not been actively maintained.

[633] AbTeC, 'About.'

The goal of AbTeC is to ensure Indigenous presence in web pages, online environments, video games and virtual worlds.[634] *TimeTraveller™* was created on AbTeC Island, AbTeC's headquarters in Second Life, which represents Aboriginally determined spaces. The Aboriginally determined space in *Second* Life enabled Skawennati and the team to create extimate forms of Indigeneity as forms of self-determination, much like *CyberPowWow*. In *TimeTraveller™* the creation of machinima, involved buying or receiving free and modifiable assets such as baskets, corn stock and bed spreads.[635] When specific assets were not available Skawennati would create assets such as animations, textures and objects that helped to build the Indigenous world through which to tell the *TimeTraveller™* story.[636] The remediation of traditional objects, such as wampum belts and bead accessories, and customised movements were brought together to recreate traditional dances in Second Life. Lewis and La Pensée argue that the work and its making is a culturally critical example of 'survivance,' a term popularised by Anishinaabe writer Gregory Vizenor as 'an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.' [637] Each episode, as Dillon and Lewis state, 'reifies First Nations presence throughout time, using the remediation of media as a means of resistance against absence.'[638]

## 5.13 Delinking of time through storytelling

Through narrative storytelling, *TimeTraveller™* asserts an Indigenous temporality that embodies a decolonial approach and delinks itself from what Mignolo describes as the 'tyranny of time as the categorical frame of modernity.'[639] The Indigenous avatars in the series move fluidly through space and time, exhibiting an agency in relation to the past, present and future. In Episode 01, the protagonist Hunter introduces himself in his present year 2121 and the *TimeTraveller™* programme, and his intention to use it to go on a 'vision quest' to uncover for himself the history of the Mohawk people. In this episode, Skawennati asserts her Indigenous approach to history through Hunter's search for an 'Indian Massacre' using the TimeTraveller headset. Hunter's first search results yield more than 86,000 hits, about which Hunter comments, 'but most of them talk about Indians being massacred. I want to hear about Indians doing some massacring.'[640] This comment and his subsequent actions reflect Hunter's wishes to delink from the dominant colonial narrative of victimry, and his intention to approach history from an empowered Indigenous positionality.

This positionality is echoed in Hunter's first-time travel in episode one, where he travels to Fort Calgary, Canada, on 24 December 24 1875. Hunter arrives inside a wooden barn filled with English settlers preparing to watch a moving picture titled *Panorama of the West* by Nestor Vance. In this scene, Skawennati remediates the panorama based on the real *Minnesota Massacre* 1863 panorama which depicts the ‘Sioux uprising’ in a series of forty-five 42 x 42-inch panels that depict the largest single-day execution in American history. The panorama depicts Sioux as savage warriors preying on defenceless settlers.[641] Skawennati remediates this panorama in Second Life, which Gaertner argues is both a political aesthetic and political act of visual sovereignty.[642] Further, through Hunter’s critical engagement with the panorama, Skawennati questions the imposed narrative used as propaganda to justify colonial violence and the stereotypical framing of Sioux and Indigenous peoples as savage warriors. Hunter’s closing dialogue reflects the need to speak back and address marginalised voices within such histories, as he states, ‘If there’s one thing every Indian knowns, it’s this: when it comes to history, always get a second opinion.’[643]

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[634] AbTec.'About.'

[635] Some assets were given by other Second Life users for free. The contributors were acknowledged in the credits of the work.

[636] Jim, 'Technologies of Self-Fashioning: Virtual Ethnicities in New Media Art,' 367.

[637] Vizenor, 'Aesthetics of Survivance ,' 1.

[638] Dillon and Lewis, 'Call it a Vision Quest,' 197.

[639] Mignolo and Walsh, 52.

[640] Episode 01 of *TimeTraveller™* is available on vimeo.

Skawennati also uses the perspective of the avatar in machinima to enact a ‘two-eyed seeing’ philosophy. In Second Life, the first-person perspective is an embodied view of the avatar and the third-person perspective, which is most common in Second Life, and allows the artist to see her full embodied avatar as an extimate image. Shifting between both perspectives allows for different emphasis and affect, where the first-person perspective creates the feeling of immersion, whilst the third-person perspective enables physical and psychological identification with the avatar body.[644] Skawennati redefines this visual shift as part of the narrative of *TimeTraveller™* through the virtual headset. The virtual headset has two modes: ‘fly on the wall mode,’ where the user of *TimeTraveller™* is not acknowledged by the avatar figures and ‘intelligent agent mode’ where the user can interact with the avatar figures. In episode one, when Hunter arrives in the wooden barn, he selects ‘fly on the wall mode’ because he does not wish to partake in action or connect with the settlers and their version of this event.

**Figure 5.11**. Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™ Episode 01 A.D.1875* (Machinima, colour, sound, 5 minutes and 59 seconds), 2008-2013.

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[641] Gaertner, ‘Back to the Future: Sovereignty and Remediation in Skawennati’s TiimTraverller ™.’
[642] Gaertner, ‘Back to the Future: Sovereignty and Remediation in Skawennati’s TimeTraveller™.’
[643] Quoted from Episode 01 A.D. 1875.
[644] Cleland, ‘Prosthetic Bodies and Virtual Cyborgs,’ 83.

**5.12**. Skawennati, *TimeTraveller*$^{TM}$ *Episode 01 A.D.1875* (Machinima, colour, sound, 5 minutes and 59 seconds), 2008-2013.

Episode one serves as a catalyst for the following episode, where the protagonist visits the conflict depicted in the Panorama. In episode two, Hunter arrives in Acton Township, Minnesota, on 17 August 1862, the day that the conflict began between the Sioux and the settlers. Hunter arrives in 'Fly on the Wall Mode' and, upon seeing a group of Sioux men, quickly changes to 'Intelligent Agent Mode,' and his avatar appears in the machinima as part of the party (Figures 5.11 and 5.22). As explained by Hunter, Intelligent Agent Mode' which utilises the third-person perspective is completely interactive as it requires the historical figures to include the new avatar in the conversation. Further, this mode also enables a new cultural definition of immersion and inclusion, as Hunter states: 'What I like most about 'IA' is you get to choose a side, so you know all the stuff your team knows, can speak and understand their language, get to feel some of what they feel…'[645] As reflected in Hunter's description, the third-person mode is a visual perspective and cultural position that, as Skawennati suggests, allows both Hunter and the user to be or feel more Native.[646]

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[645] Quoted from episode 4 of *TimeTraveller*$^{TM}$.

[646] Skawennati, personal communication with the author, 7 February 2020.

**Figure 5.13.** Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™ Episode 04 A.D.2112* (Machinima, colour, sound, duration), 2008-2013.

**5.14.** Skawennati, Episode 4. *TimeTraveller™* (Machinima, colour, sound, 8 minutes and 52 seconds duration), 2008-2013.

Intelligent Agent Mode in episode two also enables a delinking from the dominant colonial narrative of the massacre shown in episode one by exploring the same events from an Indigenous perspective (Figure 5.14). In this version of the events, the Sioux party that were alleged to have started the uprising were in fact not on a war path but were starving and hunting for food, following the late payment by the Federal Government for use of Sioux land. While out hunting, the party comes across a Christian farmer and asks him if he is able to spare a few hens. The farmer proceeds to pull his gun out and points this towards the party, who also draw their weapons, then the farmer returns inside, and the party departs to continue their search for food. As the party leaves, the farmer opens the door and is accompanied by his friends in the house who draw their weapons again. Firing ensues between both parties and the farmer and his friends are ultimately killed. As narrated by Hunter, this incident sparks a war between the Sioux and US Government, leading to the execution of 38 Indigenous people during the largest mass execution in North American History. Hunter exhibits an agency in presenting a counter-narrative to the colonial narrative of the same events in the first episode.

In episodes one and two, the avatar enables an Indigenous agency that allows the viewer to take revisionist approaches to history. The fly on the wall mode and Intelligent Agent mode represent a visual and cultural perspective akin to the anthropological terms 'etic and emic,' coined by anthropologist Kenneth Pike.[647] Intelligent Agent mode, which is the third-person perspective where the avatar is present, takes an emic perspective whereby cultural representations are represented from the point of view of the native culture. Conversely, fly on the wall mode represents the point of view of the embodied by the avatar and is presented as the view of observers outside of the culture. Communications scholar Treva Michelle Pullin argues that the two complementary visual and cultural positions are synthesised within the subject of the avatar:

> The fluid nature of the characters as they move between physical embodiment and avatar embodiment, creates a synthesis of outsider identities within a single subject as (s)he travels through time and enters into multiple histories.[648]

Through the transition of visual modes, the avatar becomes an extimate body that synthesises and makes possible these visual and cultural positions which are utilised as a site and tool for the decolonisation of Indigenous identities and histories.[649]

### 5.14 Delinking through First Nations avatars

Indigenous avatars play a critical role throughout the *TimeTraveller™* series and are part of a much larger decolonisation and indigenisation objectives of the artists and the AbTeC research network. To create the series, Skawennati and her team created a set of First Nations avatars, which Lewis and Dillion argue constitutes a contribution towards self-determination on Second Life.[650] The creation of Indigenous avatars was a direct response to the romanticised Pan-Indian stereotypes on Second Life and lack of culturally appropriate clothing. Avatars were customised to address persistent stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as technologically incapable peoples. To re-dress this, Skawennati introduces her protagonists as technologically savvy individuals, wielding some form of technology appropriate to their present time. In episode one, Hunter is shown flying using a jetpack and introducing new the TimeTraveller programme. In episode four, Karahkwenhawi is shown with an iPhone in hand and later finds the TimeTraveller headset and proceeds to us it. In both examples, Skawennati strategically positions technology in the hands of First Nation's peoples.

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[647] Barfield, *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, 148.
[648] Pullen, 'Skawennati's-TimeTraveller™: Deconstructing the Colonial Matrix in Virtual Reality,' 243.
[649] Pullen, 243.
[650] Dillon and Lewis, 'Call it a Vision Quest,'198-199.

As a visual practice, the creation of Indigenous avatars is a form of extimacy that enables the self-fashioning of Indigeneity in Second Life.[651] Skawennati's creation of Indigenous avatars and virtual assets utilises science fiction and First Nations culture as its main reference points.[652] Customisation can be categorised into two broad categories. The first appearance accounts for how an avatar looks, which can include customisations for hair, skin tone, clothing and body shape with some limitations. The second category of customisation relates to the performance of the avatar and can include movements, gestures and facial expressions.[653] In *TimeTravellerTM,* Skawennati's Indigenous avatars are customised for Indigenous appearance and performance using purchased, user-generated content and artists/team created digital content. Initially, Skawennati worked within the limited availabilities of existing appearance customisation. For example, the protagonist Hunter was created with 'Latino,' the darkest skin tone available at the time. Skawennati also purchased a punk style dreadhawk, as there were no Mohawk hairstyles available at the time. She also designed a collection of 'distressed' t-shirts for Hunter, each featuring a First Nations symbol. For Skawennati, the distressed symbols convey the venerability of the symbols themselves and visually mark Hunter's status as an Indigenous man. These efforts to customise and create First Nation avatars reflect the ways in which Skawennati utilises the avatar to express Indigeneity and individuality that is independent of the default avatar forms in Second Life.

Skawennati and the teams' creation of regalia (traditional clothing) in Second life is a critical component in the process of delinking from western narratives in *TimeTravellerTM*. In episode four, the female protagonist Karahkwenhawi finds a pair of TimeTraveller glasses and is transported to a powwow extravaganza, set in 2112 at Winnipeg Olympic Stadium. This hypothetical future is rich with customised regalia and movements that enable the remediation of traditional dances at the powwow gathering. Upon arriving at the powwow, Karahkwenhawi participates in a jingle dress dance. Jingle dresses were originally worn by Anishinaabe women for healing dances and have been adapted and performed as a pan-tribal dance in powwow. In this episode, female avatars wear jingle dresses in a variety of colours, with the characteristic sliver metal cones that adorn the dress and provide an acoustic accompaniment. The presence of jingle dresses reflects the persistence of traditional modes of dress and culture in Skawennati's vision of the future. This is echoed by futuristic clothing, such as the haute couture 'Ovoid' gowns, created for the fashion show, where traditional textiles and symbols are presented as high fashion. The ovoid is a core component of West Coast imagery and design, which is utilised as a design feature of the futuristic gowns. The use of the design feature is also a future projection of the wider participation of Indigenous peoples who historically did not participate in powwow.[654] By creating Indigenous avatars and dress forms, Skawennati highlights a critical part of the 'delinking' process, which involves the creation and insertion of a layer of materiality and cultural textures that become extimate avatars.[655]

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[651] Animations are made using QAvimator (open-source animation software developed for use with Second Life). Clothing is made in Photoshop (image editing software) using the Linden Lab's templates. Textures are made from photographs of real materials, and then post-processed in Photoshop. Simple objects (e.g. walls, doors, benches) are built in Second Life using the provided tools. Complex objects (e.g. the TimeTraveller™ glasses) are built in and exported from Maya (commercial 3D modelling and animation software).

[652] Dillon and Lewis, 'Call it a Vision Quest,' 198.

[653] Lewis and LaPensée, 'TimeTraveller™: First Nations Nonverbal Communication in Second Life,' 110.

### Avatar bodies as relational beings

The insertion of materiality as part of the delinking process serves to reconfigure and re-contextualise the avatar within an Indigenous context. This reconfiguration aligns the work within an Indigenous cultural framework; as Jahnke argues in relation to Māori art, 'It was a process of decontextualising art as an 'object of desire' or 'object of gaze' in order to reconfigure the object as a precondition of culture.'[656] The layer of materiality which includes regalia, narratives and dress, helps to redefine and reconfigure the avatar as a relational cultural figure. Ann Weinstone, in her study of Indian Tantra, proposes the subject as an 'avatar body', a zone of relationality and expression and infinite emanations. [657] Weinstone further elaborates on this notion of the avatar body, recalling notions of extimacy:

> These are not self-possessed expressions; they come and go, expand and contract, mutate, modulate, travel. Within this zone of relationality, the categories of self and other are rendered undecidable…[658]

This notion of the 'avatar body' as a relational zone illustrates Jahnke's approach to decontextualising the avatar, then re-contextualising it within an Indigenous context. For Indigenous artists such as Skawennati and Leah King-Smith, the avatar body is layered with Indigenous materiality that re-contextualises and reconfigures the avatar within Indigenous systems of relationality.

The use of the avatar as a relational body has been employed by several Indigenous artists to express ontological relationships between ancestors, land and all manners of the animate and inanimate. Bigambul artist and scholar Leah King-Smith, in her photographic and moving image practice, employs the figure of the avatar as a 'spirit being,' by framing the avatar within the Aboriginal philosophy which has been glossed in English as 'The Dreaming.'[659] The Dreaming is complex with multiple meanings that permeate every aspect of Aboriginal life, including economic, cognitive, affective and spiritual lives. Although commonly referred to as the heroic and sacred time that includes narratives of creation and ancestors, the dreaming exists in a fluid temporality that anthropologist W.H. Stanner describes as the ‘everywhen.’[660] This neologism ‘everywhen’ contrasts the notion of ‘dreamtime,’ which is often described and confined within a past, but, as W.H. Stanner states, ‘One cannot ‘fix’ The Dreaming in time; it was, and is everywhen.’[661]

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[654] Lewis and LaPensée,'TimeTraveller™: First Nations Nonverbal Communication in Second Life,' 112.

[655] Rickard, 'Tomorrow People: Skawennati.'

[656] Jahnke, 'Voices Beyond the Pae,' 16.

[657] Weinstone, *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism*, 40-41.

[658] Weinstone, 40-41.

[659] The dreaming is also referred to as 'The Dreamtime.' However, there is critique around the deducing of Indigenous epistemologies into a single word that does not accurately describe the complexities of Indigenous religion and spirituality. Christine Nicholls argues for the use of the original terms from Indigenous languages such as Manguy, Jukurrpa or Ngarrankarni, in place of the catch-all 'Dreaming'. See Nicholls, '"Dreamtime" and "the Dreaming" – an Introduction.'

This notion of everywhen can be seen in the layered photographic series *Dreaming Mum* (2008). Leah-King Smith extends the philosophy of The Dreaming to this series, which she describes as photographic dreaming. In this series, King-Smith creates black and white digital photographs of her late mother Pearl King who was of Bigambul descent. To create these works, King-Smith studied the photographs of her mother as a young woman, which were taken by her father Tom King, and selected a few images to create a series of large-scale layered photographs. As part of the series, handwritten stories were displayed with each photograph to broaden the interpretation of the photographs. The layered photographs, created through camera, scanner and photo editing, evoke a broader set of associations that attempt to present her mother as an animated spirit being. The series presents this spirit being as a ‘playful avatar,’ created through a process that King-Smith describes as photographic dreaming:

> By weaving photographic moments and places together, I am constructing a web of connections – of associations that expand the view, as it were, beyond the foreground/middle-ground/background relationships of a one-lens perspective. I could say that my work is *photography dreaming*.[662]

By weaving and layering photographic moments and memories, King-Smith frames the photographic avatar of her mother as a spirit being that exists within an Indigenous temporality of ‘everywhen.’

Layering is a critical part of King-Smith’s practice, utilised, at times, as a revisionist strategy of de-linking from colonised visual histories of Aboriginal peoples. The process is part of the artist’s challenge to the camera’s entanglement with colonial imperialism and as a ‘canonical device that interprets and filters worldviews.’[663] In the series *Dreaming Mum Again* (2008), King-Smith employs the metaphor of the avatar to assert an Aboriginal worldview that emphasises the importance of the connection between people and place. Each of the photographs in the series is a recombinant portrait, where historic photographs of her mother are interwoven with layers of imagery of landscape and native plants. The process of layering evokes relationships, memories and assertions of place through the avatar of her mother. As King-Smith states: ‘Mum is in the fabric of Bigambul Country. She is simultaneously mother, free agent, lover, model and majestic power.’[664] This process of digital layering embeds the avatar within an Indigenous framework, creating layers of materiality as a decolonial gesture, and demonstrating Mignolo and Walsh’s argument that

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[660] Stanner and Manne, *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, 57-72.
[661] Stanner and Manne, 57.
[662] National Portrait Gallery, ‘Leah King-Smith.’
[663] National Portrait Gallery.
[664] National Portrait Gallery.

> Decoloniality, without a doubt, is also contextual, relational, practice based, and lived. In addition, it is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and existentially entangled and interwoven.[665]

**Figure 5.15**. Leah King-Smith, *Studio* (Chromogenic print), 2018.

The notion of the avatar as a spirit being was also explored as a graphic figure in King-Smith's digital installation *Mill Binna* (2017), made in collaboration with sound engineer and partner Duncan King-Smith (Figure 5.16). For this collaborative work, the artists created a number of three-dimensional graphic avatars using Adobe 3D animation.[666] The title of the work 'Mill Binna' in the Bigambul language translates literally to mean eye and ear, and refers to the act of seeing and hearing. For King-Smith, the title also challenges the notion that seeing and listening are informed by modern society, which deviates from an Indigenous sensorial relationship with the environment.[667] Shown in a darkened space, the spirit beings were projected onto white plaster objects that took the form of dilly bags, traditional vessels commonly used by Aboriginal communities for gathering food. These vessels challenged the concept of a 'museum artefact' as being a static and scientifically-value commodity and, instead, *Mill Binna* presented the object as being both embodied and fluid. Using projection-mapping programmes, King-Smith enabled the spirit beings to 'inhabit' the surface of the vessels, moving fluidly in and out of corporeality. This fluid transition in the work visually connects the corporeal, spiritual presence and absence that is also echoed in the soundscapes created by Duncan that are embodiments of listening in a place.[668]

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[665] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality,* 28.
[666] In addition to the digital installation, King-Smith also created a number of still images.
[667] Leah King-Smith in communication with the author, 5 November 2020.

**Figure 5.16**. Leah King-Smith, *Mill Binna* (Installation, video projection, sound, muslin, wire and plaster), 2017.

King-Smith's creation of avatars in *Mill Binna* as spirit beings evokes the notion of extimacy conveyed in the fluid movement between corporeality and spirit. In the installation, the projector mapping ensured that the avatars moved in and out of the corporeal surface of the suspended vessels. Each of the avatars is created in the likeness of King-Smith's mother as a young woman and represents a portrait of her spirit, acknowledging the spiritual presence despite her physical absence.[669] The avatars' movements are paced somewhat slowly and vary in range to include movements like swimming, dancing, walking, and spinning, somersaulting and rope-pulling. The last movement of pulling rope is a reference to her mother's strength and character. The spiritual and corporeal nature of the avatar is reflecting in the skin, which is rendered in earthly tones of green, ochres, black, sheer white (Figure 5.17). The avatars are 'dressed' with photographs of nature, taken by King-Smith, which no longer function as indexes to the land but are intended as an adornment that cloaks the figure. In doing so, King-Smith locates the spirit beings of the avatar within a network of Indigenous connections to the spirit, body and land.

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[668] A full list of sound sources was published alongside the exhibition.

[669] King-Smith and King-Smith, 'Staging the Liminal: The Mill Binna (eye ear) Project', AAANZ Conference, 5 December 2019.

**Figure 5.17**. Leah King-Smith, Mill Binna (Animation), 2017. Still from excerpt of animation.

Indigenous and first nation artists have actively contributed to the Indigenising of cyberspace and digital applications since the very beginnings of the World Wide Web. Indigeneity as extimate forms online required a reconsideration of communal and tribal identities, which were created and maintained through discourse. As demonstrated by Rakena, the adoption of new communicative technologies enacted Indigenous spatial structures for dialogue and resolution. Through the adoption of email as a material texture, Rakena illustrates the visual and symbolic presence of Te Reo Māori as a symbol of extimate Indigeneity online. Other projects, such as those by Skawennati, pioneered the use of Indigenous frameworks and cultural practices, such as powwow gatherings, to create Aboriginally-determined spaces through social media applications from *The Palace* through to Second Life. By creating exclusive Indigenous spaces within these mainstream applications, Skawennati prioritises Indigenous narratives and perspectives in a decolonial context. Through the creation of Indigenous avatars and visual props, Skawennati demonstrates a process of de-linking that requires the insertion of another layer of materiality. By embedding the trope of the avatar within an Indigenous framework, King-Smith demonstrates the way in which the avatar is framed within Indigenous temporalities and relational systems. Collectively, these case studies demonstrate a holistic approach to the notion of Indigenous extimacy and the trope of the avatar that draws on Indigenous concepts of space, time and relationality.

## Conclusion

While the notion of cyberspace may seem antiquated and its early websites and applications clunky relics, or worse obsolete, they are in fact the foundation for understanding the contemporary experiences of the extimate avatar. This has been reflected in this thesis by the inclusion of works by artists that pre-date the web 2.0 era and mark the beginnings of artistic exploration of the creative potential of new internet technologies. These works such as *Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies* (1995) by Diane Gromala and Yacov Sharir*, Virtual Concrete* (1995) by Victoria Vesna, and *CyberPowWow* (1997) by Skawennati have served as keystones for this research. Their engagement with virtual reality headsets, webcams and graphic user chat rooms as they were emerging and evolving signalled the role artists would continue to play in shaping our understanding and experiences of digital platforms, online applications and new technologies.

Through the advancements of mobile technologies, online platforms and digital applications the trope of the extimate avatar has emerged as a key vehicle through which people could explore their identities as visual and relational. The open and interactive nature of digital platforms have created cultures of participation that have enabled new vernacular creative practices of self-portraiture such as the 'selfie' and the vlog. This thesis has argued for the expansion of the trope of the extimate avatar and its performative materiality in contemporary art to include vernacular creativity. This thesis has sought to highlight the ways in which these practices have entered contemporary arts discourse, through the work of artists who participate and engage directly with the materiality of digital platforms and online applications. By focusing on the work of artists who explore the performative materiality of digital platforms and online applications, this thesis has documented the expansion of contemporary art to include new vernacular mediums, such as 'selfies', remake videos, machinima, Chroma-keyed videos and mashups. Through close analysis of artworks, this thesis has also highlighted the expansion of artistic methodologies to include processes, such as 'modding' from gaming culture and machinima made in Second Life.

During the decade 2007-2017, the ubiquity of internet access, aided by mobile technologies, has seen a mass collapsing of notions of the public and private, which, this thesis argued, gives new significance and functionality to the trope of the avatar. Emblematic of this is the emergence of the 'selfie,' a photographic self-portraiture typically taken at arms-length to be uploaded online. The first chapter of this thesis sought to expand the trope of the extimate avatar as practices of self-portraiture within the networked environment of social media. This chapter examined the work of Janet Lilo and Erica Scourti, whose works emulate the extimate engagement on social media platforms by exploring the digital materiality. Lilo's ten year-project *Top 16* translated the digital materiality of a social networking website into a physical gallery space and emulated the interactive and collective dynamics of social networking websites. The concept of the networked body was also explored by Scourti's moving image works that rendered visible the extimate relationship between the body and technology.

Within this decade pervasive networks and the ubiquity of the internet has given rise to the celebration of the ordinary person. Andy Warhol's celebrated quote that 'in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes' was prescient for the participatory culture of YouTube, which gave rise a new form of fame. In Chapter Two, the dynamics and materiality of YouTube and the use of vernacular video, as extimate practices of self-disclosure and self-expression, were explored in relation to the work of contemporary video artists Oliver Laric, Janet Lilo, Amie Siegel and Natalie Bookchin. A close examination of their works, all of which draw directly from YouTube, highlighted how the extimacy and the trope of the avatar is employed as a communicative desire to share one's inner world and essentially to 'broadcast yourself.' As demonstrated through close analysis of the works of contemporary artists, this chapter revealed the ways in which the circulation of video continues to shape collective perception and understanding of the public and private domain.

The extimate avatar, being intimately entangled with technology and corporeality, was explored in this thesis by examining graphic avatars in virtual settings. In Chapter Three the trope of the extimate avatar was examined as a medium of contemporary artists in virtual worlds. This chapter examined the ways artists operated and created works 'in-world' and in the gallery context, which proposed a fluid relationship between the artists and their extimate avatars. This chapter followed the early creative exploration of virtual reality and the figure of the cyborg as the precedent for the later exploration of cyberspace via the figure of the avatar. These works provided a creative foundation for the practices of contemporary artists whose gallery practices extend to the virtual world of Second Life. By focusing on the work of Eva and Franco Mattes and Cao Fei and her avatar China Tracey, this chapter illustrated the extension of the artistic practice through and with their extimate avatars. As argued in this chapter their practices as avatars and artists demonstrate the artistic possibilities of being double embodied.

Closely related to virtual worlds, which are in large open-ended spaces for socialisation, are the more structured virtual worlds of massive multiplayer online gaming, which experienced rapid growth in the first decade of mobile internet. In Chapter Four the notion of the extimate avatar was examined through interactive art games created by artists who utilise games as a creative medium. This chapter offered a close analysis of three independent interactive art games by artist and game developer Alan Kwan, pixel developer Momo Pixel and video game artist Feng Mengbo. Through a close analysis of the performative materiality of their respective games, this chapter explored the trope of the extimate avatar in relation to the player-avatar relationship in games. As illustrated through this chapter, gameplay and games are a critical medium that artists have used to evoke and process memories. The potential of games was also examined in relation to play-as-activism and the technological affordance of games to transform and perhaps inform collective action and knowledge. The transformational potential of games through the player-avatar relationship is also signalled in the ways in which the alterable perspectives and game design can offer new perspectives on political histories.

This thesis has also sought to demonstrate the ways artists from diverse cultures and background have drawn on the digital materiality of the extimate avatar to create culturally specific frameworks of representation. The final chapter of this thesis examined the ways in which the trope of the extimate avatar was Indigenised through the work of contemporary Indigenous artists. In this chapter, the work of contemporary artists was contextualised within the larger Indigenous cultural sphere and the history of Indigenous peoples online. The role of artists in pioneering new Indigenous spaces was highlighted through Mohawk artist Skawennati and the creation of ‘aboriginally-determined’ spaces in the *CyberPowWow* project. Through its iterations, this project provided a critical blueprint for the extension and application of indigenous knowledge and concepts to digital platforms, online applications and new technologies. This was explored in the work of Rachael Rakena who explores the communicative potential of emails through a Te Aō Maori lens, highlighting how new technologies enabled the continuance of cultural dialogue and resolution across new digital spaces. The concept of continuance and survivance is echoed in the later works by Skawennati, whose Second Life machinima works realise decolonial methods of de-linking by inserting layers of indigenous materiality. This process of layering recontextualisation within indigenous frameworks is evident in Leah King-Smith’s redefinition of the trope of the avatar as a ‘spirit being’ within the holistic framework of The Dreaming. Collectively, these practices demonstrate the potential of the trope of the avatar to enable eximate forms of indigeneity.

This thesis has sought to expand the trope of the extimate avatar in contemporary art by focusing on the ways in which artists draw on the materiality of online platforms and digital applications. By exploring the performative materiality of digital platforms, online applications and new technologies, this thesis has recognised an expansive an evolved techno-cultural landscape that has shaped artistic practice and contemporary art. Through the close study of contemporary artists who have adopted these mediums and methodologies in their art practice, this thesis has expanded the trope of the extimate avatar within contemporary arts discourse. As illustrated throughout this thesis, the trope of the extimate avatar enables new creative opportunities for the experiences of identity in the age of extimacy.

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