What's your ID? Virtual art practices and the networked self

Rita Xavier Monteiro

Research Assistant of the unplace project[1], Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa
ritaxm@unplace.org / xaviermonteiro.rita@gmail.com

Abstract

In the age of global networking and communication, new selves are being permanently created in allegedly disembodied environments. These emergent and lively online existences have unprecedentedly blurred the boundaries between fiction-real, intimacy-exposure, private-public, near-far, in endless and unpredictable ways.

The immersion in virtual spaces and networked realities is also disturbing the borders that separate self-awareness from our sense of the others. While technology devices are increasingly sophisticated, extending our bodies and enhancing our perception of reality through them, the digital became as pervasive as familiar. Especially since the widespread popularisation of the Web 2.0, Internet users are progressively more exposed to wider, powerful forms of global interaction which easily lead them to create profiles and accounts, open blogs, download apps for mobile phones or tablets, participate in social networks like Facebook or Twitter, or share media files in sites such as Youtube, Vimeo or Flickr, to name but the most prominent examples of a vast environment in constant flux. These new contexts enabled us to re-evaluate our identity experiences and, more importantly, to perform identity.

If online creation motivates a particular kind of expanded consciousness through virtual embodiment – the possible result of human-computer symbiosis – an inescapable question arises: is collective the new self? In a similar vein, most recent artistic practices, and especially web-based artworks, naturally reflect the current paradigm of hyperconnection. Whether to demonstrate a fascination to explore new possibilities of the medium, or to make a critical viewpoint on computer-mediated communications, new media art offers rather stimulating ways of thinking about collective identity(ies).

By dealing with large scale communities that lively reinvent their wired modes of existence, Internet Art reshapes the ways relationships take place across these interfaces and puts the DigiSelf in the eye of the storm.

On the other hand, the interconnection between artists (frequently through [aka "also known as"] an internet personae) and the audience, fosters a participatory media regime of creation which raise significant authorship issues, posing new problems for contemporary art and museum practices. How are we handling this kind of ephemeral and uncontrollable artworks? Where, in the art world, can legitimacy be placed and defined? What about the implications of an open-source culture?

While the emergence of an allegedly transparent web-based society goes hand in hand with surveillance practices informed by the control of cybercontents, how can we remain anonymous online? And can we still socially play ourselves being offline? Questions of online/offline social play will here be addressed to revaluate the tensions of ID, in the sense of both identity and identification.

Focusing on examples of recent artistic practices in the field of Internet Art such as Eva and Franco Mattes (0100101110101101.org), Cory Arcangel, Petra Cortright and Amalia Ulman, this paper analyses the malleability of online identities, and its challenges, in terms of culture and power: the challenge of knowing ourselves in-between a real-virtual world.

Keywords: virtual identity; identification; Internet art; hyperconnection; control; privacy.

What's your ID? Virtual art practices and the networked self

My resume just says 'please don't google me' written in my own blood

Mira Gonzalez, Tao Lin, *Selected Tweets* (2015)

Online identities, partial identities, profiles, identifiers, personas, avatars. New space(s), another time, new possibilities for intangible selves, interaction, participation, surveillance, and an urgent need to deal with these new constellations of thought and to re-constellate our concepts about the world.

We already live in the Web 3.0 age, after the well-known Web 2.0 – a term coined by O'Reilly to describe the second generation of the World Wide Web – which does not correspond so much to a specific technical update of the system, but rather to a new way of surfing this free access platform. Since the Internet is more and more diluted in everyday life, it has become a banality, especially in a contemporary hypermediated culture marked by branding aesthetics, and the hasty consumption of data and advertisements. Users are progressively exposed to wider and more powerful forms of global communication, leading them to create profiles and accounts, open blogs, download apps for smartphones or tablets, participate in social networks like Facebook, Twitter or Whatsapp, or share media files on sites such as YouTube, Vimeo or Flickr, to name just the most prominent examples

of a vast environment that is in constant flux. These new contexts have enabled us to re-evaluate our identity experiences and, more importantly, to *perform identity*[2].

In the real world, and from an essentialist perspective, identity is related to physical and natural attributes – 'who we are' and 'what we do'. Interacting with our peers in society, our identity is also shaped, formed by characteristics that we accept, choose and define for ourselves in the sense of an enacted identity. However, if we adopt a critical and postmodernist approach with authors such as Foucault and Derrida, we will analyse self-identity as a fragmented and ambiguous structure, constantly shaken and controlled by institutional standards, as well as by corporate groups that should be unveiled. Manuel Castells proposes three types of identity: *legitimising identity*, introduced by the dominant institutions of society, which generates civil society in its original conception; *resistance identity*, in opposition to the logic of domination; and *project identity*, produced by individuals that build a new identity, redefining their position in society and the social structure (the case of feminist movements, for instance) (Castells, 2010: 8). This reference can be important when we talk about cyberspace, or the possibility of inhabiting virtual world(s) where we can experiment with new identities, projecting our 'digiself'[3] as long as it gives us the possibility of escaping from certain physical constraints determined by embodiment. Besides this intangibility, the Internet promises us a supposed sense of potential liberation, absorbing and collecting whatever we want from the world's information available online, and exposing what we want about our lives: a sense of 'self-actualisation'. But to ensure that this is possible, there is also an established power on the Web, subtle and sometimes perverse, that controls us in almost unforeseen ways: a sense of 'self-jacking'.

Reminiscent of Heidegger's view of technology as part of us (moulding our *technological perception of the world*), Bernard Stiegler notes that the "human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool – being exteriorised techno-logically" (Han, 2011: 220). In the last sixty years, man's relationship with machines has experienced a faster revolution than it did over many million years: machines have become fundamental extensions of ourselves. The Internet, created initially within the context of the Cold War, from military research, resulted in a network system developed in the 1990s known as the 'information superhighway'. The Internet has brought us a democratic open source culture that, for

better or for worse, is escaping the control of humankind. We have created objects that now escape our human hands: computers that generate hyper-objects, a hyper-reality made autonomously through encrypted codes. Therefore, a critical and pessimistic cultural stance can be adopted in the wake of the Frankfurt School, with Baudrillard and the universe of imaginary simulacra, or with Paul Virilio, in his book *Cybermonde, la politique du pire* (1996), claiming that interactivity is the equivalent of radioactivity in a cyberwar (Virilio, 2001: 172). Or we can still maintain an openly optimistic perspective and argue that the networks raised by technological interfaces have wired and extended human interactions into "unpredictable configurations of thought and creativity", as Roy Ascott (2013: 235), one of the first artists to be seduced by the wide participation of audiences, did in the early years of the Internet.

While technology is oriented towards the object's 'function', creativity, particularly in contemporary art, is, instead, concerned with the 'idea', and the 'form' that shapes an idea. Not surprisingly, the first generation of Internet artists, fascinated by computer-mediated communication, have opened up new fields, shaking traditional concepts and art practices. Artists such as Vuk Cosic, Alexei Shulgin, Olia Lialina and JODI, among others, who founded the *net.art* movement, started to create characters, inventing fictional identities, not only to follow the deconstruction of the self in Postmodernity, but also to provoke authorship issues, disturbing art organisations worldwide. For Pierre Lévy (2001: 129), these web artworks bring to our minds Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *rhizome*, which is actually the same name as that of an important website platform and artbase affiliate to the New Museum in New York[4]. After this initial movement, media artists are now using web tools to produce not only online, but also offline works, highlighting, in a critical and ironic mood, virtual contents and the presence of the Web culture in contemporary society.

Over the last few years, these *unplaces*[5] have brought us the capacity to freely construct a new identity, or a multitude of shifting selves, driving us to a self-creation aesthetic both in art and in everyday life, in-between a real-virtual world. Because, in fact, nowadays we almost cannot live outside our networked reality.

Please, Add Me!

#selfactualisation: performing identities

What does it mean to be a person online? Immersion in virtual spaces disturbs the borders that separate self-awareness from our sense of others. Machines are helping us to shape our identity: users become actors of themselves, constructing new egos through social and virtual meetings. In this way, Cartesian 'mind-body' dualism and metaphysical binaries – 'real self' versus 'fake self' – or even sociological analysis – 'mirrors' versus 'artificial masks' – are constantly being deconstructed. Online creation motivates a particular kind of expanded consciousness through virtual embodiment – the possible result of human-computer symbiosis and all the Posthuman discourse – which reaches its utmost climax in *extropy* philosophies and in the idea of *transhumanism*, downloadable identities over cyberspace. Interestingly, artistic projects that have been developed in the last few years impose a critical distance upon the viewer and online consumer, playing with the organisation of software programmes, 'pop-cultural' messages and materials**.**

In a 'Please, Add Me!' mood, Amalia Ulman, an Argentinian-born Spanish artist working on discrimination and social structures, created an online performance over a period of three months named *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), in which she enacted a fictional version of herself. Her profile account received roughly 65,000 followers on Instagram. By studying particular female profiles, the language they use on tweets, hashtags, 'selfie' styles and postures, Ulman carefully fabricates a character for an image, staged and intended to evoke the real life behind, and to reflect upon, a fanciful lifestyle that is sold through social media. Ensuring the narrative atmosphere, she trained her body, made pole dance, took yoga classes and also had a boob job and carefully studied sets, props and Photoshop uses before taking the pics. The project was a reflection about flesh as object and the body as an investment, and for how long it stays fresh. On her own words (2014): "Now, we humans are not just entitled to one faux-natural self, but to many of them - and forced to perform them in a very natural way. The subtle refreshed face, the new me." We can say that this project is an Instagram and Facebook archive of Amalia Ulman by Amalia Ulman – *eating, blogging, shopping & sleeping* – a narrative of a character taken as real, with its ups and downs, corresponding to the expectations and comments of the audience, in order to make

fiction more credible. "I manipulated the rhythm of my online identity" (2014), she says, meaning a provision for 'self-actualisation'. The artist puts into circulation an online art object, developing a *relational aesthetic* à la Bourriaud, hatching a place where artist and public can share, for a time, new ways of living together through peer-to-peer networks, a pervasive aspect of recent artistic practices, especially web-based artworks. These kinds of interactions, stimulated by real people hiding behind nicknames – who feed intense dialogues in comment boxes and expose self-definitions – naturally reflect the current paradigm of hyperconnection. Thus, an inescapable question arises: is "collective" the new self? On the other hand, in the case of participatory art on the Web, artistic identity and spectatorship issues present new challenges for contemporary art and museums.
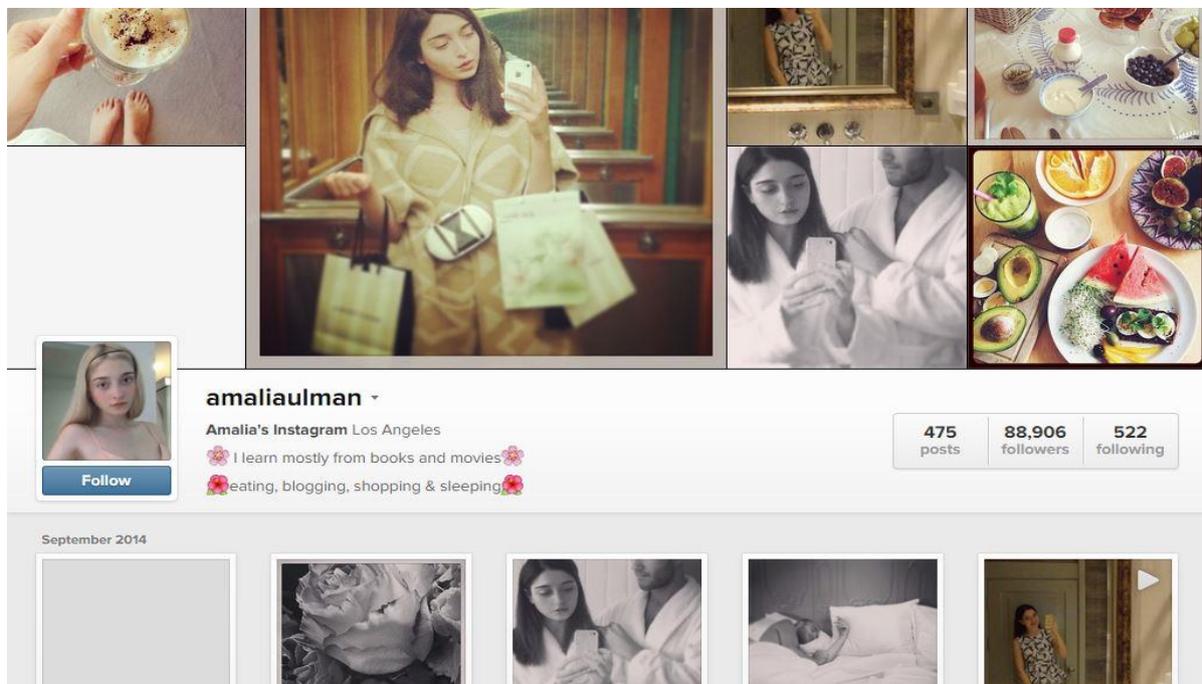
Amalia Ulman, *Excellences and Perfections* (2014). Online Performance. Screenshot.

In 1996, Mouchette appeared on the art scene with a website project, presenting a fictional character whose true identity remains unknown.

Cory Arcangel, an important reference on the Internet Art scene, known for his hackerism and videogame modifications, developed a project named *Working On My Novel* (2012-13): a Twitter Account where he 'retweets' profiles using the phrase "I am working on my Novel". In the same vein, Paolo Cirio and Alessandro Ludovico made a global mass media

performance when they stole one million Facebook profiles, filtered and sorted by their facial expression on the Lovely-faces.com website. The aim of *Face to Facebook – Hacking Monopolism Trilogy* (2011) was to "give all these virtual identities a new shared place to expose themselves freely, breaking Facebook's constraints and boring social rules".

'Audience' is the new author. Audience is both the subject and the object in social network art projects, where there is also a game of showing the difference between intimacy and exposure within tenuous borders. Eva and Franco Mattes, 'a.k.a.' 0100101110101101.org, stripped their online privacy by creating *Life_Sharing* (2000-2003), a website that turned their private lives into a public artwork. Visitors could freely search for and copy texts, photos, emails, bank statements and even the system itself.

In another sense, Petra Cortright, sought to review passive surveillance on screens, and worked on several videos presenting herself in front of the webcam. Like Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974), she mirrored the viewer's own experience while sitting in front of a computer, consuming online content. Like a double blind effect, in which neither the author nor the audience are consciously perceiving an artistic object, these works reflect upon 'extreme intimacy' versus 'worldwide presence' as situated in the same place-time through a networked embrace.
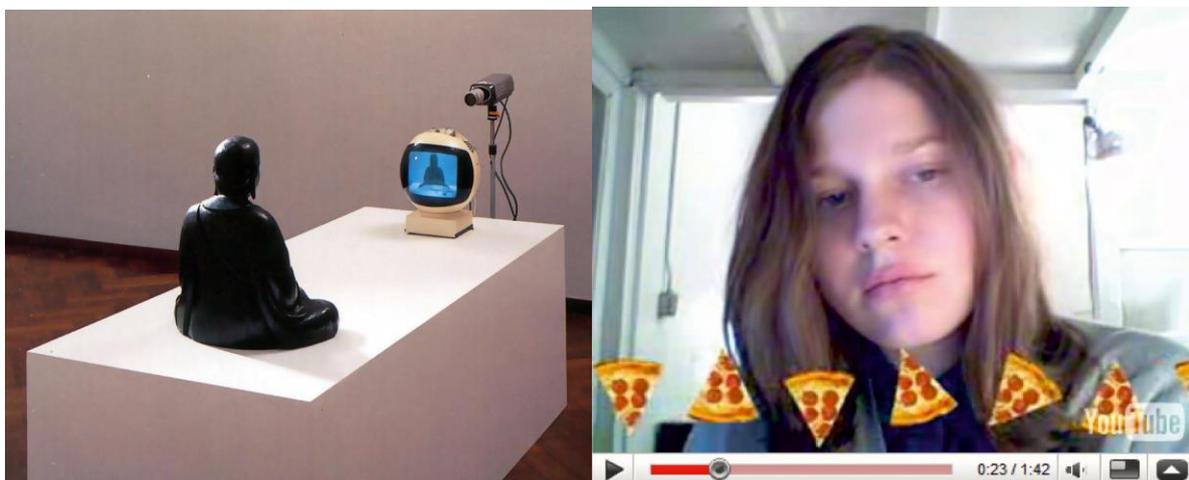
Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha* (1974) and Petra Cortright *VVEBCAM* (2007). rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/53474. Screenshot.

If we analyse the designation of 'Facebook' what we have is a 'book' of images and videos, digitalised entities which, almost paradoxically, never allow a face-to-face relationship with

others but only a mediated, interfaced connection between online personas. Would we actually 'scan' or 'scam' our face? As Zizek (2006) cleverly pointed out, in cyberspace communication there is always a "gap between the *subject of enunciation* (the anonymous person who does it, who speaks) and the *subject of the enunciated/of the statement.*" Symptoms of our times reveal how the virtual world, this kind of microcosm, has affected real lives, invading the quotidian in a way that has become embedded in bodies too. Consequently, cybernetic diseases are increasing, such as new disorders, addictions, identity thefts and radical cases that bring everything to the very edge: a suicide for failing to take the perfect 'selfie'.

Deeply rooted in the idea of 'disembodied embodiment' – an individual presentation or re-presentation of the body to the screen, one can see that recent virtual identity studies have overcome their initial instrumentalist perspective. According to Castells (2010: 7), identities are sources of meaning, a process of self-construction through different facets of individuation – "meaning is organised around a primary identity (that is an identity that frames the others), which is self-sustaining across time and space". On this issue, we can also fruitfully look at the research carried out by Sherry Turkle, who belongs to the first generation of virtual identity studies in the nineties. Turkle (1997: 147) postulates that when we present intangible "second selves", all people get is what we actually show them – "They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words." Even if computer-mediated communications are still very much guided by text conversations, by email or by chats, mirroring a type of socialisation, now images are more powerful than words and textual references. 'Digiself' is more than a keyboard. It is a personal ID interacting in cyberspace where there are customisation options to represent the 'digibody', not to mention the creation of avatars.

Whereas the Internet condition is incorporated into offline life, for Zizek (2006), virtual environments will always construct a dangerous illusion, the real without substance, like a product deprived of its malicious property, as in his example: "In the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, my online screen persona, the 'you' that I see there, is a decaffeinated self. (…) My electronic id is given wing".

Please, Delete Me!

#selfjacking: identity and identification

What is your ID? It can be both identity and identification, although they can become mixed together on the Web. Facebook security tools will ask you a question like 'Not (your name)?' if you enter the wrong password to access your own profile.
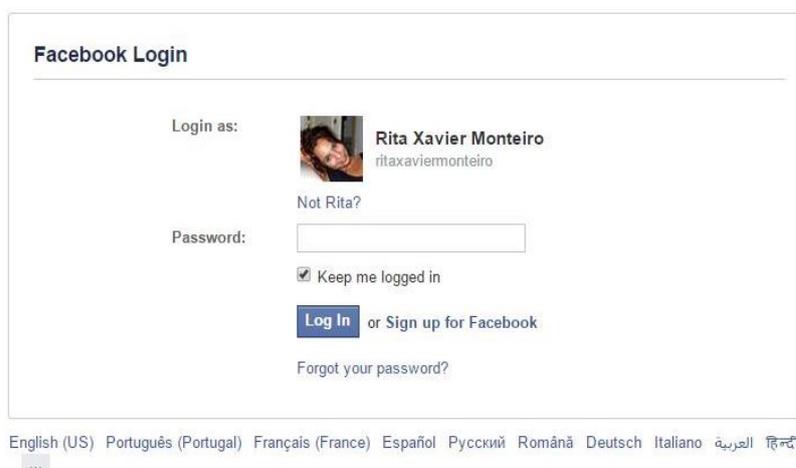

The author's Facebook page. Screenshot.

Multiple authorisations and protocols of recognition guarantee that social networks are increasingly committed to regulating registrations and third-party identity data: the user makes the choice to share personal information, but programmes are prohibited from distributing it, selling it, or otherwise sharing it with other brands (Salyer, 2015). Lawrence Lessig (2006: 31), one of the Creative Commons founders, says that authentication is how identity becomes known but "much about your identity is revealed whether you want it or not."

The whole Internet system is built upon Internet Protocol Addresses that carry algorithmic information from machine to machine. Curiously, since the system only moves data, it does not authenticate it which entities actually sent the information. That is why Lessig (2006: 45) draws attention to the fact that "While in real space anonymity has to be created, in

cyberspace anonymity is the given". This means that people and even machines can simulate an online identity, 'selfjacking', and easily exert control over people. To take an artistic example that illustrates the operation of these mechanisms, *Directions to Last Visitor* (2011) is a website by Charles Broskoski, which interacts with Google Maps. The project gives users driving directions to the last person who visited the site, through their IP address, revealing the ease with which software mechanisms can geographically locate users. Beyond that, some companies and individuals take advantage of open source free flow to compile information on behalf of a user. These information broker websites collect public, professional or personal information for business or other purposes.

Directions to Last Visitor
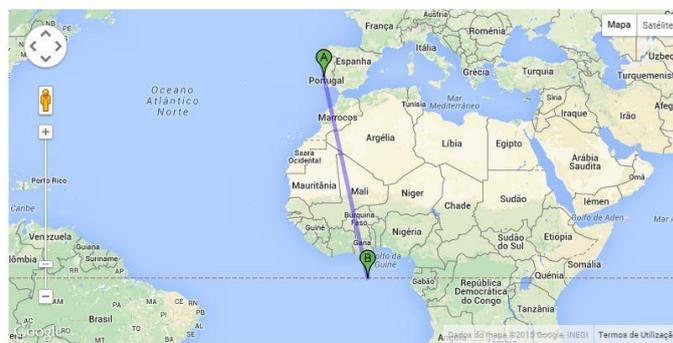
You (95.92.41.109)

38.7192766°, -9.1268763°

Previous visitor (177.222.240.100)

Charles Broskoski, *Directions to Last Visitor* (2011), in directionstolastvisitor.com. Screenshot.

Since everywhere people are constantly employing this huge database, we have reached a point where apps like DeleteMe, Snapchat (which allows users to send messages that disappear immediately after delivery) have become very popular. This is a surveillance society, embedded in technologies, trying to create tools indexing a set of characteristics that are associated with each individual – identifiers – but which are surreptitiously harvesting our private data, as in the dystopian prediction of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1959) "Big Brother is watching you!"

The recent "right to be forgotten", a concept that has been under discussion by the European Union since 2006, is enabling users to take greater control over their data. Since

May 2014, European citizens have been able to request search engineers to remove outdated or incorrect information. While this right appears to protect citizens, it has met with the unfavourable opinions of those who argue that it mostly relates to information that was previously made public. The emergence of an allegedly transparent web-based society goes hand in hand with surveillance practices that are informed by the control of Internet contents. With the mission of preserving everything for everyone, Google's slogan says "Don't be evil!" expressing a desire to have the world content universally accessible. But are we prepared for the consequences of 'googlisation' in the near future? How can we remain anonymous online? And can we still socially play ourselves when we are offline?

Final remarks

New Media Art offers stimulating ways of thinking about collective identity(ies) as, at the same time, media identity itself is dramatically changing. We now have other ways of perceiving the world and connecting with others. For artists, it is a great challenge to feel the untouched audience through a computer. As JODI remarked "When a viewer looks at our work, we are inside his computer… and we are honoured to be in somebody's computer" (Berry, 2000).

Cyberspace forces a third dimension, a copy of the world that can be uploaded and can generate its own uncontrollable dynamics. For these decentred identities, bodies can be dressed in different suitcases, reconstructed behind screens hidden from the real, instantaneously communicating just a click away. And we may 'like', 'comment', 'upload', 'download', 'add', 'unfriend', 'identify', 'remove identification', we may choose to reveal ourselves online, our preferences, desires and fears, or not; but we cannot escape from networked IDs any more. Online and offline social play shows the complexity of IDs when virtuality and reality are the other sides of the same coin. These are both already parts of us whether as singular or collective beings.

Just like Fernando Pessoa and his multiple heteronyms – virtual beings as multiple realisations of oneself – Internet artworks reflect the nature, and anticipate the reinterpretation, of the networked self.

Fernando Pessoa Facebook account. Screenshot.

Notes:

1. The unplace project is promoted by Instituto Superior Técnico, Universidade de Lisboa (PI: Helena Barranha), in cooperation with Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa and the Gulbenkian Next Future Programme. It is funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, through the State Budget. Ref. EXPL/CPC-EAT/1175/201.
2. To 'perform identity' is an idea used by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, 1990, to refer to virtual gender swapping, and the notion of gender as performance or gender performativity.
3. Digiself' means an identity that is represented and acts in digital media.
4. "Founded in 1996 by Mark Tribe, *Rhizome* supports contemporary art that creates richer and more critical digital cultures. As an arts organization based on the internet, we re-think artistic creation, distribution, and reception in relation to changing conditions associated with network technologies: shifting attentions, uncertain objects, multiple authors, casual labors. An affiliate in residence at the New Museum in New York, we are a leading international organization to support art and technology." *Rhizome* (2015).
5. unplace is the acronym of the research project to which the author belongs (unplace – A Museum Without a Place), about contemporary art exhibitions specifically produced for virtual and networked contexts. unplace.org (2015).

References:

ASCOTT, R.; SHANKEN, E. (ed.) (2013). *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*, California: University of California Press.

BERRY, J. (2001). "Human, all too Posthuman? Net art and its Critics", *Intermedia Art – New Media, Sound and Performance* – Tate. Available from: http://www2.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/. [Accessed: 21.04.2015].

BROSKOVSKI, C. (2011). *Directions to Last Visitor*, online artwork. Available from: http://directionstolastvisitor.com/. [Accessed: 21.04.2015].

CASTELLS, M. (2010). *The Power of Identity: economy, society and culture*. UK: Willey-Blackwell, Second Edition.

CIRIO, P. (2011). *Face-to-facebook*, artwork register. Available from: http://www.paolocirio.net/work/face-to-facebook/ [Accessed: 21.04.2015].

CORTRIGHT, P. (2015). *Vvebcam*, artwork register, 2007, *Rhizome* database. Available from: http://rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/53474/. [Accessed: 21.04.2015].

HAN, S. (2011). "Virtual Identities: From decentered to distributed selves". In: ELLIOT, A. ed., *Routledge Handbook on Identity Studies*, New York: Routledge. PP.219-235.

LESSIG, L. (2006). *Code version 2.0*. Cambridge: Basic Books, Perseus Books Group.

LÉVY, P. (2001). *Cyberculture*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

MATTES, E., F. (2000-2003). *Life_Sharing*, artwork register. Available from: http://0100101110101101.org/life-sharing/. [Accessed: 24.04.2015].

MOUCHETTE (1996). *Mouchette*, online atwork. Available from: http://mouchette.org [Accessed: 24.04.2015].

RHIZOME. Available from: http://rhizome.org/ [Accessed: 24.04.2015].

SALYER, P. (2015). "No, You're Not Giving Away Your Online Identity", *Re/code*. Available from: http://recode.net/2015/02/26/no-youre-not-giving-away-your-online-identity/.[Accessed: 24.04.2015].

ULMAN, A., HORNING, Rob (2014). *"*Perpetual Provisional Selves: A conversation about authenticity and social media", *Rhizome*. Available at: http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/dec/11/rob-horning-and-amalia-ulman/. [Accessed: 24.04.2015].

ULMAN, A. (2014). *Excellences and Perfections,* exhibition, New Museum. Available from: http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/amalia-ulman-excellences-perfections [Accessed: 21.04.2015].

VIRILIO, P., ARMITAGE, J. (ed.) (2001). *Virilio Live*. London: Sage Publications.

ZIZEK, S. (2006). "Is this digital democracy, or a new tyranny of cyberspace?", *The Guardian*. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/dec/30/comment.med[Accessed: 24.04.2015].