

This morning, while I was surfing the usual news websites, I stumbled across the following opening lines: "Hackers evolve from pranksters into profiteers. Computer identity theft has long been a fast-growing cybercrime. But increasingly, hackers are seeking profit rather than just fun." (*USA Today*) "Surveillance Nation: Webcams, tracking devices, and interlinked databases are leading to the elimination of unmonitored public space. Are we prepared for the consequences of the intelligence-gathering network we're unintentionally building?" (*MIT Technology Review*) And there was a text about a man who auctioned off electrical equipment on eBay under a false name but then did not deliver the goods after receiving payment. And a Reuters' text about the chats Microsoft X-Box users have on a new players' online network.

At first glance, these are three texts on very different topics, but upon closer examination they have something in common: they all deal with identity on the Internet, with the construction of an online self. *MIT Technology Review* enumerates the countless and ever growing possibilities for being spied on and tracked down via the Internet and other networks, and for becoming fodder for databanks with personality profiles. X-Box players, according to Reuters, use the Microsoft network primarily to chat with each other under a pseudonym. And the crime of the eBay swindler as well as of hackers who gain access to passwords and credit card numbers in order to empty bank accounts or shop online is even called: "identity theft". "It's the perfect crime of the information age", *USA Today* cites a staff member of an American banking supervision board as saying, "the Internet gives identity thieves multiple opportunities to steal personal identifiers and gain access to financial data."

In the early 21st century, "identity theft" and the possibilities of "multiple online personalities" has become a subject of everyday bulletins. And it may indeed be a good idea to step back for a

moment from time to time and realize that these so seemingly familiar news items today would have been at most the subject of science-fiction stories not too long ago. The issue of "freely configurable" identity and subjectivity, so commonplace today due to the worldwide networking and immaterialization of communication processes, first began playing an important role in the 1990s within two discourses which, admittedly, hardly took notice of each other, but in retrospect display a remarkable proximity: on the one hand, in traditional art; on the other hand, in the debate on the new possibilities for interaction and communication which digital media began to offer at the time, and their cultural offshoot: net art.

I would like to illustrate in this text how the debate on issues of identity has repeatedly been pushed forward by technological innovations, and how art has taken up and examined indeed with growing keenness not only with reference to but rather through direct and practical exploration of these technologies. The references between visual art and cinema, video and the Internet are manifold, and often muddled, but one theme repeatedly surfaces at the heart of this artistic exploration of the latest media of each period: identity, subjectivity, the self. And in each instance whether it was cinema, video or the Internet the exploration of this problem has been the product of the genuine properties of these technologies as media. In this context, one can even speak of a constantly recurring motif of media art, one which evolves from the specific technical properties of technical media.

In my investigation, I have proceeded from a project which in this context signals for me an end point in a development of media art and in particular of Internet art: "life\_sharing"(Fig. 1) by the Italian group 0100101110101101.ORG which, depending on one's perspective, takes from the start either a disillusioned or an illusionless look at cyber-Utopias of the 1990s and at conceptions of

subject and identity negotiated in connection with these Utopias.

"life\_sharing" (an anagram of "file sharing", i.e. exchanging "music" files via the Internet) allows access via the WorldWideWeb to the computer of the two artists. This computer has not only their entire software and other digital material on it, but also all of the artists' e-mails. Visitors can read 0100101110101101.ORG's complete e-mail correspondence since 1999. Afterwards they are familiar with the artists' exact web address, their (secret) real names, their postal address, account number, earnings, exhibition plans or invitations to lectures. One can learn about their private contacts with friends, gossip from the media art scene and other things not normally for the public. In 2002, in a continuation of this project entitled "VOPOs", one could check daily on a website where the artists were at any moment, since their cell phones transmitted their respective positions several times a day to the Internet, where the locations of the two 0100101110101101.ORG members were displayed on a map.

To put it briefly: "life\_sharing" is a relatively complete form of self-exposure. Since both the professional as well as the private life of 0100101110101101.ORG occurs, or at least is coordinated, to a large extent via computer, there are few aspects of the artists' lives which cannot be viewed by these means. One could almost describe "life\_sharing" as a kind of online self-portrait. Of course, this self-portrait leaves almost as much open as it conceals: for despite all its openness, it does not reveal what the two people look like who are working at this computer. Unlike the countless Internet exhibitionists who continually film themselves doing daily tasks and then distribute these images on the Internet (like the now famous "JenniCam"), 0100101110101101.ORG entirely refrains from giving visual information, providing only digital texts. And unlike all the webcam girls and boys, 0100101110101101.ORG cannot even

# The Self on the Screen

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influence what viewers see by how they position cameras and so deprive themselves of the most important method with which human subjectivity is wrested from the apparatus in cinema. The machine with which 0100101110101101.ORG work, simply registers all the data they come into contact with.

The fact that machines can record and reproduce every human movement and emotion is, of course, the primal media experience; and since the emergence of photography as well as of the phonograph in the late 19th century, it has sometimes been viewed with horror or as downright traumatic. At other times it has triggered optimistic ideas of a "new man", an "expanded consciousness" and a "freely definable subjectivity".

Long before anyone could even imagine such a global multimedia communication network such as the Internet, it was the cinema which first made a topic and motif of its technical dispositif. Much has been written about early cinema's fondness of doppelgangers or doubles, indeed this subject has become a similar topos in literature on cinema as the subject of the Wiedergänger has on the screen: the armies of shadows and mirror-images that have come to life, from "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and "The Portrait of Dorian Gray", clones and all the mechanical doubles to the doppelgangers created from the flesh of their makers that have populated film and TV screens for over a century.

Their origin in German Romanticism or works by Dostoevskii has been extensively described. They have been interpreted as critique of the human hubris or as satirical reflection of their environment. Yet these doppelgangers, which early cinema so enjoyed making the subject of its stories, can be understood as an allegory of the reflecting power of the medium itself. For the most obvious property of photography and cinema is the incessant production and reproduction of doppelgangers. Photography and film also have doubling qualities.

As Roland Barthes emphasizes in his book "Camera Lucida": "A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (...). By nature, the Photograph has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world; they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish which navigate in convoy, as though united in an eternal coitus."(1) These specific properties of photography as a medium, its potential for infinite technical reproducibility, mark its relationship to pre-photographic reality. "The direct physical relationship between light-reflecting objects and their 'take' in the chemical surface of the film makes photography analogous to the world of material objects beyond the picture." From this technical circumstance, Katharina Sykora deduces certain "shared structural aspects" between photography/film and the motif of the android, but what she states is doubly true for doppelgänger figures on the screen. These doubles, which have above all played an important role in fantasy films, can at all times also be read as a screen reflection of cinema technology with its qualities to directly reproduce and imprint.

Particularly German cinema of the 1920s is rich in doppelgangers and figures divided between different bodies. Among such films is "The Student from Prague", which has been remade several times, and in which the student sells his mirror-image to a sorcerer. Another such film is Max Mack's "The Other" (Fig. 2) . "Dr. Mabuse" (Fig. 3), who first appears as the director of a "lunatic asylum" and then as one of its "inmates", must also be mentioned in this context. The many artificial humans found in films such as "Alraune", "Metropolis" or diverse other treatments of material about the Golem and Homunculus, can also be seen as a continuation of the doppelgänger motif.

Strikingly, it was primarily horror films which never tired of dealing with the horrors of the reproduced self.

In "The Haunted Screen", Lotte Eisner points out the special meaning of motifs of shadows and mirrors in the silent films of the Weimar Republic: "In their trips through the looking-glass the metaphysically-inclined Germans go much deeper than Alice (that essentially very materialistic little girl). The rhyme of Schein (seeming) with Sein (being) leads them like Tieck, to juggle with reality and dreams until the forms born of the darkness seem the only genuine ones."(2)

In contrast to this romanticizing description, Siegfried Kracauer interpreted "The Student of Prague" as an allegory of the German middle class in the 1920s: "By separating Baldwin from his reflection and making both face each other, Wegener's film symbolizes a specific kind of split personality. Instead of being unaware of his own duality, the panic-stricken Baldwin realizes that he is in the grip of an antagonist who is nobody but himself. This was an old motif surrounded by a halo of meanings, but was it not also a dreamlike transcription of what the German middle class actually experienced in its relation to the feudal caste running Germany?" Even if one is not so inclined to follow Kracauer's rather willful Marxist-materialist interpretation, the fact that "The Student of Prague" is by all means marked by a "deep and fearful concern with the foundations of the self" cannot be denied.

Just as the technological parameters of film played a part in this concern and the ensuing motif of the doppelgänger in early cinema, the topic of identity and subjectivity also played an important role in the next medium accessible to artists: video. Lucid observers quickly noted that in the early video art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the self, (artistic) subjectivity, was a central motif. In 1976, in a now famous essay written for "October"

magazine, Rosalind Krauss describes an "aesthetics of narcissism" as one of the most salient features of new video art(3). Based on some works by artists such as Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, Bruce Naumann, Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis, Joan Jonas and Peter Campus, she points out a preoccupation of the artist with his or her self as one of the most prevalent motifs of video art(Fig.4). By the way, a fact often forgotten today as it is in part hard to imagine: for Krauss video was not predominantly sculptural video installations or the presentation of finished tapes, but works using feedback or closed-circuit arrangements, or that were used as a component of a performance.

The recurring motif of the doppelgänger in German cinema of the 1920s, which resulted from the reproducing qualities of the medium, repeatedly depicted the decentering of human subjectivity. Krauss, on the hand, detected a completely different attitude with video: "The self and its reflected image are of course literally separate. But the agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object." In contrast to the decentered, literally 'torn' subject of German silent films, one can speak of subjectivity and the apparatus of a reproducing medium absorbing each other in the early video art works described by Krauss. Instead of a sense of horror at the duplication of the human image, such as played so significant a role in German silent film, Krauss detects in early video art a kind of "peaceful coexistence" between recording/replay technologies and their subjects, which may have been encouraged by the technology-friendly or even underlying euphoria in the new technologies prevailing in the art scene at the time.

Initially, net culture and art in the 1990s took an almost playful approach to the topic of the reproduction of the self: its keenness to experiment and lack of seriousness set it apart from the analytical-indifferent attitude of video art

towards its subject. As with cinema and video, it was once again the genuine properties of new digital technologies as media that made the topic of identity and subjectivity so compelling. The anonymous character of online environments allows their users to develop new and, if need be, different identities, as well as to present themselves on the Internet without any correspondence having to exist with their real personalities.

It should be emphasized here that by no means only Internet art which was oriented towards traditional high art was immediately interested in this topic. Rather, cyber-entities suddenly appeared, independently and without having been coordinated, in such diverse forums as mailing lists, MUDs and MOOs, chats and the web. These entities all played with their ability to be ascribed to a real entity. Concealed behind avatars, nicks, fictitious e-mail addresses or figures in an online game, one could or can splendidly experiment with the possibilities of self-portrayal in online environments. On the Internet, a person's identity, gender, age, ethnic origin, class membership, etc. have become manipulable, unstable entities.

These games took place against the backdrop of a postmodern debate on the "constructedness" of human subjectivity, "hybrid identities" and the "deconstruction" and "de-essentialization" of categories such as gender and race. Even if most of the participants in this play probably had no knowledge of such academic debates, their experiments can be seen as entirely congruent with such discussions. The American psychologist Sherry Turkle, who in her books "The Second Self" and "Life on the Screen" investigated the impact of computers and the Internet on the self-image of her patients, summarized the facts neatly in the phrase: "Computers embody postmodern theory and bring it down to earth."(4)

On the other hand, it can be assumed that the participants in experiments conducted in the early

net art of the mid-1990s had at least a rudimentary knowledge of the postmodern debates revolving around the self. The abundance of works done on identity and subjectivity at this time are almost too enormous too assess; they are so numerous that this motif came ironical period will be mentioned briefly here: in her work "Bodies Inc.", American artist Victoria Vesna allowed users to construct their own online bodies from a variety of digital elements and, when necessary, to bury them in a designated cemetery. For a net art competition put on by the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, German artist Cornelia Sollfrank created over one hundred alleged cyberartists, who then submitted their entries to the competition via e-mail addresses set up just for this purpose ("Female Extension", 1997). Austrian artist Eva Wohlgemuth had her entire body scanned in the USA and used the data from this 3D wire-frame model for manipulations on her website. All these works play with human identity and the possibility of their manipulation "in cyberspace".

In this context one net entity became especially notorious: she was called Netochka Nezvanova or N.N. and she flooded countless mailing lists on cyberculture and net art with her contributions as of 1997. In a peculiar hotchpotch of English, French, German and diverse programming languages, she presented herself by cursing and insulting most of the participants. The campaign, evidently conceived as advertising for a computer program on real-time manipulation of multimedia data, seemed to have come from a whole group of participants. It is an amusing example of how different people could converge in one online identity, instead as was usually the case of one person splitting into diverse online identities.

Initially the attention which N.N. attracted in this campaign led to a string of invitations to festivals; yet it was not long before everything related to this artificial figure quieted down. And otherwise too, little remains at the beginning of the 21st

century of the delight of the mid-1990s in the supposedly so freely selectable and constructible online identity. Moreover, ever since the American music and film industry successfully tracked down the identity of users of peer-to-peer exchanges so as to reprimand or even take proceedings against them, and since a series of dramatic trials have been held dealing with illegal materials on private websites, the myth of the unrestricted freedom of cyberspace has suffered. After the passage of strict laws on the liabilities of Internet users in different countries (including the USA and Germany) and laws requiring providers to store all user data or even to actively monitor their users for violations of the law, the Internet no longer seems to be a Utopia with much scope for playing with identity and subjectivity, but rather a panopticum for perfect surveillance.

"life \_sharing" marks exactly this post-Utopian point in the history of the Internet and translates it into a kind of Internet ready-made: a personal computer that is in fact nothing else but a personal computer. Without selecting, it stoically records all in and outgoing digital data and holds it for retrieval offering, like a deaf and dumb waiter, all

the information stored on it about its owner. In a certain way this work evades analysis in the same way as did the pathological narcissist of whom Freud wrote he was incurable because he was just plain not interested in any form of therapy.

Yet against the background of the development of the doppelganger and double as motifs in media art made with film, video and the Internet, "life\_sharing" appears to be an acceptance of the inevitable: of the fact that the machines which surround us constantly register and record data about us and that this information can be retrieved at any time. 0100101110101101.ORG accept this technologically-generated status quo, yet they do not do so without an ulterior form of resistance: instead of freezing in horror when faced with their digital doppelgangers or trying to conceal or encode these data, they make them as accessible as possible, as if they might be able to disown their continual reproduction precisely by clogging the media's channels. Politically and in terms of data protection, this might be seen as a problematic choice, yet it is simultaneously a conscious reflection on how to deal with this topic, one which most others recorded pursue without even

knowing it.

And what has come of the horror which filled contemporaries in the early 20th century when confronted with the possibility of their reproducibility in media? The doppelganger the evil Mr. Hyde who accompanies the Dr. Jekyll of our everyday ego has today become the protagonist in computer games like "Grand Theft Auto". Now, under his new *nom-de-guerre*, Tommy Vercetti, he serves as frame and pretence to live out one's most asocial urges, and by doing so to "win" "mission" after "mission". At this very moment, a few hundred-thousand people around the globe are probably busy stealing, murdering, blackmailing or committing arson in the cyberspace of their PlayStations. In 1913, when sorcerer Acapinelli bought the student of Prague's mirror-image for the very first time, he would not have even dared dream of such an army of devious doubles.

This text was originally written for the magazine *File*.  
Reinhard Braun/Michael Rieper (eds.) *File* 2, p.147 - 157

(1) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida - Reflexions on Photography*, London, Vintage, 1993, p. 5-6

(2) Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, London Secker & Warburg 1973, p. 130

(3) Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", in: Gregory Battcock, *New Artists Video - A Critical Anthology*, New York, Dutton 1978, p.43-63

(4) Sherry Turkle, *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet*, New York, Simon & Schuster 1995, p.18