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Digital Performativity and its Slippage of Agency in Cyberspace

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This paper explores the intricate relationship between performance and identity formation, particularly in the context of digital environments. Through an exploration of various dialogues and spaces, it examines how identities are constructed, unfolded, and transformed through acts of performance. Furthermore, it introduces the concept of digital performativity and its automated manifestations within digital networks, challenging traditional notions of performance and identity in the digital age. Drawing from discourses of Surveillance Capitalism and object-oriented identity, the paper argues for the autonomy of digital performativity, shedding light on its unique characteristics and implications for identity construction in the cybernetic era.

1. Introduction

Performance has always been taken as an important approach to construct or deconstruct self-images: How does performance negotiate identities? In different dialogues and spaces, how do identities take shape, unfold, and transform through acts? From traditional performance in theatrical settings to the performative digital realities that we live in today, how has performance been altered and what new possibilities have emerged through the shift into digital lenses? In this essay, I introduce the notion of performativity in digital networks and propose that digital performativity has been automated. In chapter two, I discuss what is performance from theatrical to contemporary settings, and investigate the notion of body, shame and desire, and users in the context of self-exhibition and identity-making of performance. I also interrogate power/resistance dualism by introducing the concept of performativity. Then I transit my focus to digital performativity and its characteristics. In chapter three, I propose the autonomy of digital performativity through discourses of Surveillance Capitalism and object-oriented identity.

2. Performance and performativity: from physical to digital spaces and the gaze of the camera

2.1 Performance in theatre

Performance in traditional settings is conducted in pre-defined frameworks: it suggests an actor who consciously follows – or refuses to follow – a script. Individual is not free to choose an identity in the way they might select an outfit. Equally, the individual is not condemned to simply act out a structurally determined identity (McKinlay 2010, 233).

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In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,* Judith Butler states that Identity is conceived as the "stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity"(2016, 520). According to Erving Goffman in his The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, the "front stage" that activates the script, is the setting where the performer is subject to judgment against generally accepted social norms, from an audience equates with "society." The "back stage" in contrast, is a safe environment where the performer can "relax, drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (Goffman 1990, 70). Therefore, the script, can be deemed as an omnipresent circumscriber to the acts, bounding the body to its construct of predetermined identities.

But how do we perceive acts and make them into certain constructs of image? Speaking from the phenomenological perspective, acts are language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign to build social reality through social agents (Butler 2016, 519), and as audiences, we go into theatres with expectations and institutionalised presumptions. Even if we don't have any knowledge or context about the performance, we are still introduced to the pre-established role-playings and our impression of these identities keeps being reinforced when the script is at play. Hence the body undertakes the pressure of performing in alignment with these impressions, and confirms the identity of the actor. There is nothing "low-maintenance" and "natural" about bodies. It undergoes the "forced reiteration of norms" to enact identities — a stylised entity to compose social, cultural, and historical construction in performance.

Goffman discusses that "people in the same social establishment are constantly engaged in the process of 'impression management,' wherein each tries to present themselves and behave in a way that will prevent the embarrassment of themselves or others"(Goffman 1990, 74). He keeps on explaining further that all parties in the interaction are working to achieve the same 'definition of the situation,' meaning that all understand what is meant to happen in that situation, what to expect from the others involved, and thus how they themselves should behave. Butler further addresses this impression management as a belief system — "that constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief" (Butler 2016, 520). The performance essentially propagates a collective making of identities where the observers impel the actor to act in the avoidance of the feeling of shame, the shame of failing to achieve a prescribed impression, a shared belief.

Therefore, I argue that traditional performance is the construction and realisation of pre-contextualised beliefs empowered by social and cultural construct — the audience forges the gaze, whilst the actor materialises it into identities. The body is present but at the same time absent — the portrait of self in its bodily realities is hidden and irrelevant. The performance is fundamentally an operation of creating and consuming cultural products through its act.

2.2. Performance in art and improvisation

Transitioning from fully scripted performance pieces to improvisations and performance in art, what new epistemologies and ontologies of identity have emerged? How does artist destabilise the notion of fixed

identities and shift the power apparatus through the construct of self? With the aid of technology — camera and video camera, has the context of users changed?

> *Basically one wants to say something which cannot be said, so we make a poem where one can feel what I meant.*
>
> *(Birringer 1986, p.97)*

Art performance is a reclamation of agency, an empowerment of creating the bodily realities in the performers' own will, a break free from the "front stage" of the social norms. Artists constantly investigate and challenge the portrayal of self, and disturb the familiar relation of the physical body. It interrupts the social interaction and belief system in the settings of traditional theatrical performance, which also reflects on Derrida's theorisation of 'deconstruction', 'presence' and 'absence', identity 'formation' and 'deformation' (Derrida 1981).

Improvisation, as an essential artistic methodology, celebrates individual 'identities' rather than actualising subscribed collective beliefs. Improvisers use techniques and technologies to actively generate a conversation of control and freedom, from strictly scored works to semi-structured practices and free improvisations. It explores the relatedness and interaction of elements in a system, in Dancer Steve Paxton's words, it "nurtures movement and place and, patterns emerge to which an artist can respond." In improvisation, these patterns can be both expected and unexpected. The unpredictable and predictable tension in improvisation challenges the practice of the artist. We look to the artist's work, which we believe, "encompasses a holistic technicity, a process that combines the momentary, emergent quality of improvisational practices, techniques at the construct of being and the function of dynamic, interactive systems" (Broadhurst 2012, 21). We contend that such works are not found in predetermined or fully scripted pieces and that some artists have the intent of articulating and emulating emergent, complex systems in their practice.

Hence improvisation creates the momentary dialogues within its social environment, which upsets the 'impression management' system and new bodily realities emerge. Dancer Pina Bausch uses her choreography to continually frustrate audience expectations by fusing disparate elements, frequently incorporating new technological developments that are juxtaposed creating a distancing effect and causing the audience to actively participate in the activity of producing new meaning.

Broadhurst also states that "In many performances, there is a continual construction and deconstruction of identity together with the problematization of originary meaning." Referring to Dr Olu Taiwo's theory on 'being, becoming, and performance', where he argues that "becoming that results from feelings concerning wholeness and internal flourishing, which is a consequence of an active and constructive engagement with one's personal struggle; a struggle that attempts to reconcile the expressions of different conflicting internal voices; voices within a network of competing identities underpinning an individual" (Broadhurst 2012, 44).

Artist and photographer Cindy Sherman is well-known for her interrogation of the Instability, multiplicity, and complex nature of identities. In Sherman's Self-portraiture and Untitled Film Stills photogra-

phy series, she transformed herself into all different kinds of characters from either the mundane life or Hollywood Glamour, you can barely recognise herself through all the enactments of othered life. She performed for the camera in the role of a cinematic auteur — she set up the whole stage as well. The Writer Ingrid Sischy noted, "She's the director, the producer, the set designer, the costume mistress, and the star as well... In her hands, images aren't straitjackets but vehicles to show the infinite possibilities of who she could be" (O'Hagan 2019).

Fig.1. Cindy Sherman, *Doctor and nurse*, 1980.

By presenting herself in every single work of hers, but completely camouflaging till her image of self is obscured and transformed, is she unfolding the network of her layered, competing identities manifesting or is there a larger social context she is trying to confront through her role-plays? Critics have argued that her work is "a dark mirror to our era of self-obsession," it is driven by the pleasure of self-exhibition, and she staged a playground for her identity fantasies with the aid of technology. However, Cindy claimed the opposite: "People assume that a self-portrait is narcissistic and you're trying to reveal something about yourself; fantasies or autobiographical information. In fact none of my work is about me or my private life." Her life is nothing like the grotesque always depicted in her work, instead, she watches telly and stays in a lot, "I am terribly average, I buy my tits and asses from the same store as my noses. Now I think I have every kind of fake breast and backside available" (Rumbold 2017).

The fact that Sherman uses synthetic attachments to construct alternative body realities through her mundane life characters illustrates a resistance again the social normality of the body. Liz Parr addresses that "Synthetic or superficial interventions on the body are considered unnatural thus deceptive prosthetic, fake attachments of body, " thereby the alternative identities Sherman establishes through her photographic performance are registered as invalid and inauthentic entities in institutions.

Dean Spade talks about the neutrality of the body in "Dress to kill fight to win", he claims that "There is no such thing as an unmodified body — we come to reject and unlearn the ways we've been taught to view our bodies (fatphobia, racism, sexism, gender rigidity, consumerism, ableism)—when we appeal to some notion of an unmodified or undecorated body, we participate in the adoption of a false neutrality. We pretend, in those moments, that there is a natural body or fashion, a way of dressing or wearing yourself that is not a product of culture.

Norms always masquerade as non-choices." (Spade) Thus the performer succeeds in de-neutralising the body and unlearning the body from its institutionalised experiences through their acts.

Panteha Abareshi is a Canadian-born American multidisciplinary artist who works primarily with installation, video, and performance. Abareshi's art practice roots in their existence living with sickle cell zero beta thalassemia - a genetic blood disorder that causes debilitating pain. She keeps exploring her identities through the "malfunction", "otherness", and "illness" in her own bodily struggle and embodied social experience. In socially accepted norms, her body is treated not like a body — the lack of representation and misrepresentation of the complexities of living within a body that is highly monitored and constantly examined has alienated her body almost into a specimen. Abareshi said, "my body is truly treated as a pound of flesh, the vitals that it produces, and the malfunctions it abounds in. In my performance work, I am pushing my own vulnerability and objectification to discuss the realities of mortality and fragility, and the complexities of empowerment in the face of literal powerlessness." (Abareshi) By taking images of recognisable human forms and reducing them to gestural shapes, she juxtaposes her own body's objectification and dissection.

In Abareshi's video performance work Unlearn the Body (2020), she renders her body as an object that clambers atop crutch handles, entangles itself with walkers, and tumbles through the bars. By fully exposing her vulnerabilities as she moves and interacts strangely with her mobile devices in front of the camera, she empowers her absolute powerlessness under the indifferent cold camera lens of examination. She goes on about her practice of subverting the notion of identity, "Identity as we know it is so highly linked to bodily form, and linked to aspects of bodily existence that are taken for granted. I aim to explore these questions in this region of identity, pushing to articulate my own fears, insecurities and confusions around my illness-identity." (Abareshi)

If we look at both Sherman's photographic and Abareshi's film,

Fig.2. Abareshi Panteha, *Unlearn the Body*, 2021.

there is a shift in the notion of identity, from 'who we are' to 'with whom we connect'. Both their work mediate through the camera lens and pose their ideas on the neutralisation and disempowerment of identity systems to a larger related audience. Comparing to the audience in theatrical settings who is constantly evolving in the identity-making procedure, the user in art performance becomes distanced and irrelevant. The performer devotes themselves to impressing or frustrating the camera through their performance, which reflects and re-envisions both their personal and cultural identities at large. The camera becomes the gaze,

the normalising power behind the mass media, and the performer has the agency to do whatever they want in front of it.

There was a perception that the video camera could undo the power structures of the media landscape when used independently, and could potentially undermine the politics and norms of mass culture. As stated by curator Glenn Phillips, "The promise held by video, that it could create 'personal media,' that normal people could control the production of video imagery and bypass tightly controlled corporate structure of commercial media, seemed like a revolutionary and democratic advance (Gauthier 2019, 3).

2.3. Performativity and moving into cyberspace

After the unfolding of the power/resistance relations in art performance and the discussions around its subversion of social political power structures in identity ontologies, there comes the perfect timing to discuss the concept of performativity. Performativity is not to be confused with performance. Performativity is a process concept that seeks to escape – or at least to reject – the dualism of structure and agency (McKinlay 2010, 234). It is the materialisation of norms, a process that is inherently unstable, latent with the possibility of resistance. Performativity refers both to the fragility and the stubborn consistency of identity (McKinlay 2010, 235).

Performativity is also a transition from individual struggles within the memories of their own bodily experience to a collective consciousness. As Butler points out, "Performativity is a collective, political endeavour" (Butler 2016, 498). It affirms the credibility of its own production through self portraits and projects an ideal through media for the audience to interact with.

Butler dissects the notion of performativity. She points out that there are two forms of performativity: mimicry and citation (McKinlay 2010, 235). Inescapably, any identity can't be developed through the void of pure imagination. Even with alternative identities that act as protests of the hegemonic identities — they are the reactions to the pre-existent structures, which means identities are mimed or imitated in the everyday practices and speech of individuals. Therefore, identity of any kind involves mimicry. Mckinlay further clarifies that "Mimicry sits uneasily and ambiguously between identificatory collusion and the subversion of a given, ascribed identity (McKinlay 2010, 237). Quite where the act of mimicry sits is dependent upon the degree of readability and intentionality." In Butler's Gender Trouble, she argues that the key to claiming the leading identity is through the repetition of prescribed language that lends itself to mimicry, a form of reiteration that signifies the inherent instability of established language and identity. The second mechanism of performativity to be considered is citation. According to Mckinlay, "citation is the process of enacting a self-identity that is linked to a wider imagined community and tradition", (McKinlay 2010, 238) which corresponds to Butler's statement on performativity being a collective establishment. Hereby we need to address a question: If Performativity is formatted as mimicry and citation, what is its relation to "authenticity"? How do we validate their readability in its complexity? Shoshana Felman argues that individual identity is always and necessarily a failing project in which one can never achieve anything other than an approximation of a 'real' identity. Each moment of mimicry and

citation represents not, then, an acting out of an identity but the pursuit of an imaginary, impossible ideal (Felman 2003, 42).

Most importantly, performativity confirms the autonomy and authority of the subject, which provides us with a different power apparatus against social political institutions: we as performers can enact the full potential of identity fantasies, struggles, or desires. We are finally eliminating the shame — the shame of being incapable to perform socially prescribed identities, and taking back the agency of deciding our own bodily realities.

Performativity does not only manifest in art but also permeates all aspects of our daily life. As Butler puts it, "the enactment of identities in everyday life roots performativity in mundane daily experience." In cyberspace, the idea of performativity seems to apply essentially in the phenomenons of our digital life on social media. We, as digital citizens are in fact, constantly performing our identities in our daily networked interactions.

We will be looking at the materiality of social media, ...to dissect the phenomena where people either voluntarily or involuntarily perform on social networks. Danah boyd, one of the most prolific scholars in the field, defines Social network sites(SNS) as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Van Doorn 2010, 584).

Because of the fast-developing speed of technologies and social media updates, this definition Boyd coined in 2007 might needs an update, but it still provides a general framework for understanding SNSs and our popular social networks of today.

Comparing to physical performance where the physical body has to be present, our digital performative acts require no physicality to enact. Butler's stand on "identities enacts through embodied experiences and acts" (Butler 2015) falls out of element in the digital arena too. Furthermore, going back to Goffman's theory on "front stage" and "back stage", (Goffman 1990) actors in digital performance make no transition between their "performing status" and "off status", considering the digital and physical spaces have been inherently blended with each other through the easy accessibility and mobility of our digital devices. This absence of physical interaction with our body might obfuscate the fact that we are performing — since we might not realise when we put on the "costumes" to perform in cyberspaces and take them as an underlying part of our pre-established identities. Therefore in our present ubiquitous tech-led world, with people leading more omni-channel lives, our online and offline lives are becoming harder to discern.

Our online profiles incarnate into our digital bodies and provide the social context for interactions in a space that lacks both a physical infrastructure and a visible audience (Van Doorn 2010, 585). Instead of deriving social norms from other people's embodied presence, users have to create and interpret the semiotic resources (i.e. text, images, videos) that make up their profiles, which effectively constitute a digital infrastructure (Van Doorn 2010, 588). That being said, digital performance can be undertaken not only with talk, symbols, and objects which are claimed the 'social' elements in impression management theory, but also with texts, emojis, internet 'Readymade', interaction materials, etc..,

which provides new possibilities and alternatives to construct/deconstruct self portraits online. Cindy Sherman embarked on the exploration of her digital identities on social media too. Instead of setting up the whole scene, changing outfits, and even putting on prosthetic body attachments, she uses social media as tools to achieve her body dysmorphia just as she intended to do in her previous works. Her instagram, once was private, now has become a repertoire of her wildly distorted selfies, flower arrangements and disturbing hospital self-portraits, with oxygen tubes up her nostrils (Becker 2017). With the aid of digital filters, editing, and post-processing, her self portraits become even more dramatically morphed into fictional creatures. The work seems to be made specifically for Instagram, and not as a physical work for a future show in a gallery. They are created specifically for the lens of social media, weaved into the nature of digital performative behaviour.

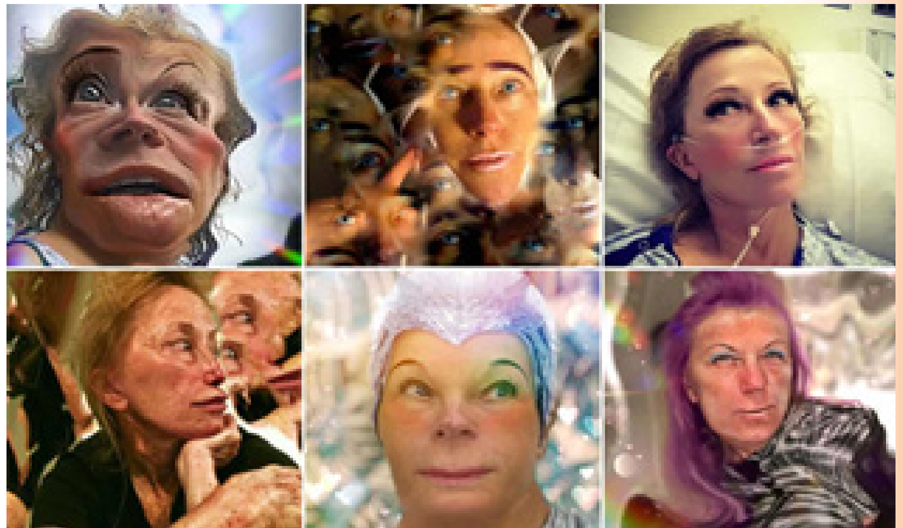

Fig.3. Cindy Sherman, Instagram posts, ongoing.

Sherman does not primarily perform for the camera anymore — But for an expansive but invisible audience constituting an online social network. These interactions dialogically produce a shared social reality through the distribution and interpretation of these artefacts. In other words, the meanings produced on the profiles are not the accomplishment of individual performances, but instead are an effect of the cultural negotiations that take place within a network (Van Doorn 2010, 594).

The representation of self transits into a communicative body. boyd and Heer further explore the relationship between identity and the online social network, examining how users simultaneously construct themselves and others on their profiles (Van Doorn 2010, 596). They argue that the construction of a personal profile on an SNS is not an autonomous effort, but instead the result of continuous interactions with one's online social environment. With the hyperconnectivity and hybrid identity epistemology in the nature of digital performativity at play, the collective attribute that Butler stresses grows exponentially in cyberspace. Hence we are going to look into a form of emotional contagion as a factor that motivates digital citizens to perform compulsively.

One study researched emotional contagion on social media with a series of experiments. Emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness. In an experiment with people who use Facebook, they tested whether emotional contagion occurs in online interac-

tion between individuals by reducing the amount of emotional content in the News Feed. The result shows when positive expressions were reduced, people produced fewer positive posts and more negative posts; when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite pattern occurred (Kramer 2014). The conclusion from the study is the observation of others' positive experiences on social media constitutes a positive experience for people. Therefore there is a chain reaction of feedback on our digital performativity: a butterfly effect of emotion that takes effect unconsciously and drives us to perform.

Kathleen Hartnett, a researcher on social media behaviour pointed out the usage of dramatic expressions in digital networking interactions in one of her talks about Digital Ethnography. People often exaggerate their emotions in online communications, which is often perceived as "dramatic", "narcissistic", or even "fake". One example is our usage of all capitalised words or extreme expressions to show our emotions like "I AM DYING," "LOLL" in digital communications. She further analyses the phenomena and suggests two main factors at play: firstly these kinds of behaviour demonstrate how performative behaviour seeks attention in the noise of digital interactivity, in the explosion of content in cyberspace; secondly it is driven by a form of emotional contagion/feedback system — when people receive performative emotions from others, they tend to react in the same emotional intensity or even higher to match the received level of expression from the other end of the device, to meet up certain expectations and not disappoint the user on the other end (Harnett 2016).

The desire to be seen, to be noticed besides the emotional contagion factor in Hartnett's example is also intriguing — Without the presence of our physical bodies, how do we make sure we are being perceived and connected in the digital social network of potential audience? The performative capitalised words in our webchats, are they act to insert our power for representation? Does this excessive power and agency elicit certain anxiety or shame that pushes us to perform?

"Language has been granted too much power," Karen Barad claims in her book "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter". She further explains that performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real (Barad 2018, 238). Hence, in ironic contrast to the misconception that would equate performativity with a form of linguistic monism that takes language to be the stuff of reality, performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve (Barad 2018, 232).

Barad's thoughts on "the excessiveness of power" that performativity grants us are thought-provoking. The power evokes a "reversed shame", a shame of not fulfilling the 'ideal' that performativity projects through productions of self, referring back to Butler's statement (Barad 2018; Butler 2016). It is not the shame from the gaze in theatrical performance where the actor fears not achieving a prescribed belief, but the opposite — they are scared of not being capable of presenting the complexity of their identities within their given power, unseen and unheard. This reversed shame magnifies our desire and anxiety over our

image. We do because we can, and because others are doing it — we are performing for the sake of power at our hands to some extent.

Molly soda is a web artist who works on a variety of digital platforms, including multiple social media outlets like Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram to produce selfies videos, GIFs, zines, and web-based performance art. Her art website looks like a digital gallery, or a digital assemblage of her online persona, displaying all her work in a collaged fashion, being scrutinised under the digital gaze.

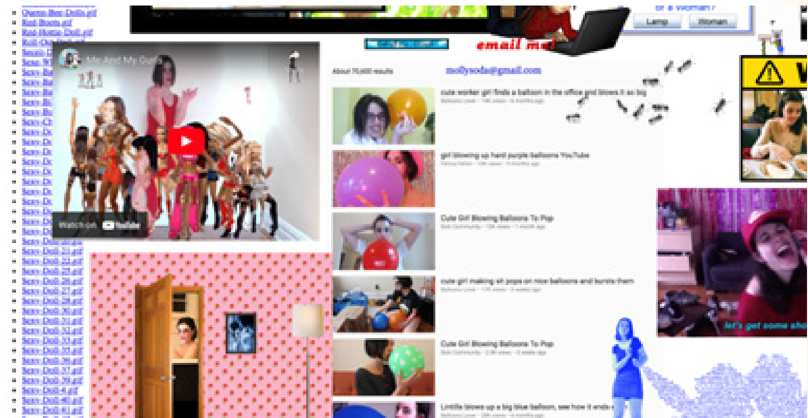

Fig.4. Molly Soda, website, ongoing.

Molly Soda expresses that she feels a sense of belonging in social networks, like she has the control to be fully represented through her performances. In Soda's work, 'shame' has been a drive for her to perform for the digital media: "I'm really interested in why you feel embarrassed about something, why something is shameful to you. How to pull that out of yourself, how to deal with it. In a lot of ways, it comes from a sense of self-protection or control" (Geffen 2018). Think about the notion of shame as a constantly shifting and interactive consciousness — it is heavily impacted by interactions and feedback we expect or receive. Molly states that a lot of her work deals with the reactions that people give her: secondhand embarrassment they might be feeling or shame attached to something they see. But the premise of getting feedback is that her work is being seen and digested by a fairly large audience. She talks about the attention-seeking in digital networks: "It's the Pavlovian bell. We are all looking for the food bowl with the bell." (Geffen 2018) So the question is, does the importance of being seen overweighs what we are trying to say within our identity performance?

Barad believes that "one's identity exists insofar an intra-activity involving meaning and matter takes place" (Barad 2018, 227) – before this, neither meaning nor matter would exist. She argues that it's more of a power game, in her own words as "... bring to the forefront important questions of ontology, materiality, and agency, while social constructivist approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen" (Barad 2018, 225).

In conclusion, digital performativity is embedded in its materiality, intra-action of its social-political network, shame/anxiety over self-image, and power exhibition.

2. Slippage between agency and cyber performativity

While digital citizens hail the sovereign individual of liberalism in their identity performance, McKinlay points out that there is nothing original or purely driven by our agency — the appearance is just the disguise of established authority: “the individual is, so to speak, merely quoting an already established set of conventions. This is a process of quoting that conceals its own status as quotation” (McKinlay 2010, 235).

In her book The Age of Surveillance Capitalism Shoshana Zuboff quoted what a Google software engineer once said, “The goal now is to automate them. We are learning how to write the music, and then we let the music make them dance” (Zuboff 2020, 14).

In this section I purpose that digital performativity is actually automated — there is a slippage of agency and our performative behaviour is manoeuvred by tech corporations for their capital gain. Performativity in cyberspace is essentially a highly monitored human future market where humans produce and transact their identity as commodities. I will draw from a few discourses to substantiate my statement including Surveillance capitalism, belief and feedback system, agency, and object-oriented identity.

Our network life and interactions can’t exist without infrastructures built by tech corporations, which means they also own our online data when they provide us with their service. Our data are constantly being surveilled, tracked, and sold to all types of corporations in digital networks. Zuboff refers to digital human data as “free raw material” or as Bruce Schneier called them “human natural resources”(Naughton 2019) for Surveillance capitalists to trade for production and sales. Parry Page materialises and compares our digital bodies, thoughts and feelings to nature’s meadows, rivers, oceans and forests, implying a future where these human materials will be exploited and fall into the market dynamic (Naughton 2019).

As we discussed in the first section of the essay the audience of digital performativity is rendered as an expansive but invisible social network constituted by individual users — but the underlying infrastructure inhabits the power dynamic between all users and the capitalist counterpart: “The combination of state surveillance and its capitalist counterpart means that digital technology is separating the citizens in all societies into two groups: the watchers (invisible, unknown and unaccountable) and the watched” (Naughton 2019).

Further, the watchers are not satisfied by only profiting from the raw digital human data, they are moving in the direction of building predictive behavioural models with our raw data. It is a reorientation from knowledge to power — that it is no longer enough to automate information flows about us; the goal now is to automate us (Zuboff 2020, p.14). The predictive models aim not only to predict our behaviour but also to modify our actions for the most profitable outcomes. Zuboff calls it “a behavioural futures market that sells human futures”, from which new forms of social inequality have emerged and it is inherently anti-democratic.”

Even though these predictive networks are fed off our identity materials, companies take full ownership of them. They lurk in the dark and mine every move of ours without our awareness. At the grassroots, systems are designed to evade individual awareness, undermining hu-

man agency, eliminating decision rights, diminishing autonomy and depriving us of the right to combat (Naughton 2019).

Surveillance Capitalists are becoming the puppetry masters, rather than those scriptwriters in theatres who exert power on the performer on the front stage — They dressed in the fashions of advocacy and emancipation, appealing to and exploiting contemporary anxieties, while the real action was hidden offstage (Zuboff 2020, 14). Quoting back on Felman and Hollywood's view on 'the impossible ideal' that identity attempts to mime and approximate, and "each moment of mimicry and citation [in performativity] represents not, then, an acting out of an identity but the pursuit of an imaginary, impossible ideal," I propose that the watchers/behavioural futures market holders have carefully constructed 'the ideal' and inserted beliefs in our brain, then "empower" us to pursue them with our insubstantial agency endlessly for profit (Felman 2003; Hollywood 2002).

I will use the beauty culture on social media as an instance of how capitalists steer our behaviour with constructed beliefs. Liz Barr addresses her view on 'beauty': "Beauty is about work. But if you wear makeup, it's supposed to be subtle and "natural" looking, like the "no-makeup makeup" trend. The "no-makeup makeup" trend or #NoMakeup movement on social media aims to encourage women to embrace their natural beauty and post makeup-free selfies. If you search on Instagram, there are over 20 million posts with the hashtag "nomakeup" on them. And what do these photos look like? Photos featured people with nice glowy skin, sun-kissed tan, and cute freckles get more likes and comments. "'No-makeup' makeup sounds like an oxymoron. But ask anyone in the beauty industry, which is valued at $445 billion, and they'll tell you a good chunk of those photos tagged #nomakeup online actually require multiple cosmetics to look so 'natural,'" explains Leigh Beeson of the University of Georgia (Sternberg 2021). They are projecting an illusion, an ideal of beauty here: that beauty is natural and can be achieved without effort. As a result, this impossible ideal of beauty solidifies into a reality with exposure and positive feedback they received, which intensifies our anxiety about self-image and manoeuvres us into the pursuit of an impossible mission of "natural beauty". But how are people performing this effortless beauty role? Ironically, by buying more cosmetics or skincare products — the no-makeup movement has been great for business, consumers have been spending higher levels of disposable income on cosmetics than they had in the past, according to Statista (Sternberg 2021).

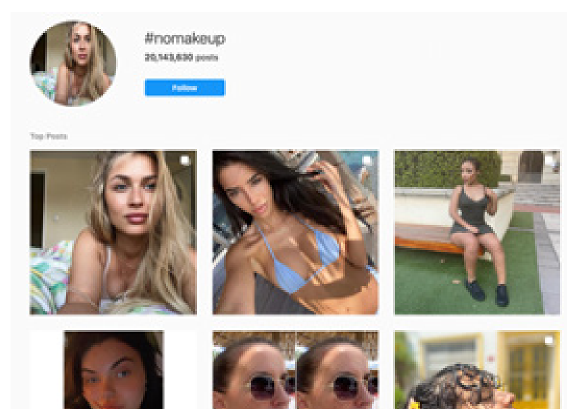

Fig.5. Instagram Search "#nomakeup".

Ian Cheng's work Bag of Beliefs showcases an AI creature whose personality, body, and life script evolve across exhibitions. It is a simulation that focuses on an individual agent's capacity to deal with surprise: the subjective difference between expectations and perception (2020). The agent evolves when it is upset, which occurs when there is a mismatch between its beliefs and the realities. In other words, if the agent's beliefs do not correspond to the world's "realities", the world upsets them. The agent then has to prove itself again, by updating its beliefs. The positive feedback is given to reinforce its bias and trust in the world's realities, and "we deny these artificial systems the status of sentience when they have no skin in the game of self-legislation," says Cheng.

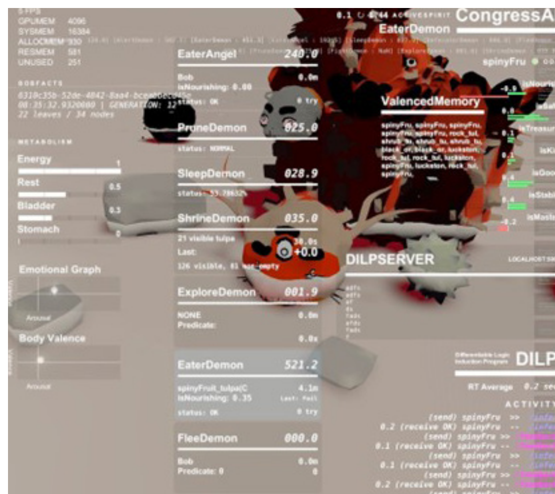

Fig.6. Ian Cheng, *Bag of Beliefs*, 2020.

'The status of sentience' symbolises digital performativity in our digital lived experiences, where we perform to approximate the constructed ideals, and maintain seen and relevant in cyber networks. Katherine Behar investigates the materiality of identities through the lens of object-oriented ontology, where she argues that "secondary qualities of people objects are becoming detachable and remixable independent objects." It coincides with Carl Jung's theory on subpersonalities — "Identity is a collection of subpersonalities, each with their own motives and a preferred subset of beliefs" (Jung 1996, 183). Digital performativity is the automated making and unmaking of identity — transactions of human future commodities to feed in surveillance capitalism's surplus flows. Just like what Behar says, "like how we see objects: we use them, we display them, we discard them" (Behar 2018).

3. Conclusion

They are learning how to write the music, and then they let the music make us dance. Digital citizens have incarnated into Sisyphuses trapped in the dreams of emancipation that surveillance capitalists sell us. How do we reclaim the agency in our digital performativity? As the era of Web 3.0 is approaching, maybe it is time for us to think about the possibilities of creating alternative digital networks to habitat in.

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