

Anna Zhu - A comparison of the virtual performer Lil Miquela to fictional performers in the context of performance theory and identity performance

The disembodied spirit is immortal; there is nothing of it that can grow old or die. - Thomas Hobbes

The relevance of virtual performers nowadays

The artistic product of this analysis is the virtual performer Lil Miquela. Lil Miquela is a fictional singer, social media influencer and model, who has millions of followers on Instagram and whose songs have been streamed millions of times on Spotify. Lil Miquela was created by producer and DJ Trevor McFedries & Sara Decou. This popularity of virtual performers urges for scientific exploration and opens the question of what exactly is a virtual performer. In this paper I would like to argue, that much like real-life identity performers, virtual performers have the potential to have a great influence on performance art.

There are many different meanings to the word 'virtual.' According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition for 'virtual' is, anything, "almost or nearly as described, but not completely or according to strict definition." In the context of computing, 'virtual' describes anything "not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so".¹ A virtual performer as of this day, is a fictional digital character, that require at least one real life person behind the scenes, that created and performs the character. Although virtual performers are not a new phenomenon, the recent advances in CGI, that help the technological actualization of their virtual bodies, lead to a surge in the emergence of virtual performers. Virtual bands like Gorillaz² are pioneers in this field, while K/DA, a virtual K-Pop girl group, have experienced the biggest mainstream acceptance.³

¹ Definitions from Oxford Languages.

² <https://www.gorillaz.com>

³ <https://na.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/event/kda-official-fan-club/>

Lil Miquela, a 19-year-old freckled face girl, started off with an Instagram profile in 2016.⁴ Scrolling through the pages of it, the images could pass off as the ones of a real person. We see her in celebrity everyday life situations, posing with friends, in the supermarket, on the street. She almost seems real, with only her slightly digital looking rendering giving a hint of her virtuality. She engages in politics, encouraging voting, while still showing a casual care-free lifestyle.

The virtual performer in the context of performance theory

In her music videos Lil Miquela performs her songs, just like any other musician would do, but with the special ability to perform stunts that normal humans can only achieve with the help of tricks. She blends in next to real human performers, being portrait in the usual problems that real young adults have to face.



⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/?hl=en>



lilmiquela • Following
Reginas Grocery

lilmiquela • Never had a mom before, because I'm a 🤖. (I'd want one like Regina, but that'd make Roman my brother and he's TOO FINE for family).

15w

+

_blokoro @lilmiquela .yarns o who asked u 🤔

12w Reply

chaimaekhadri @hala_bc

12w 1 like Reply

139,187 likes
OCTOBER 10, 2020

Add a comment... Post



lilmiquela • Following
SEVEN-ELEVEN

lilmiquela • GIMMIE A KISS @lilmosey 🤖

19w

+

destastion This girl has a shadow

13w Reply

norellado y este @marieancona

12w 1 like Reply

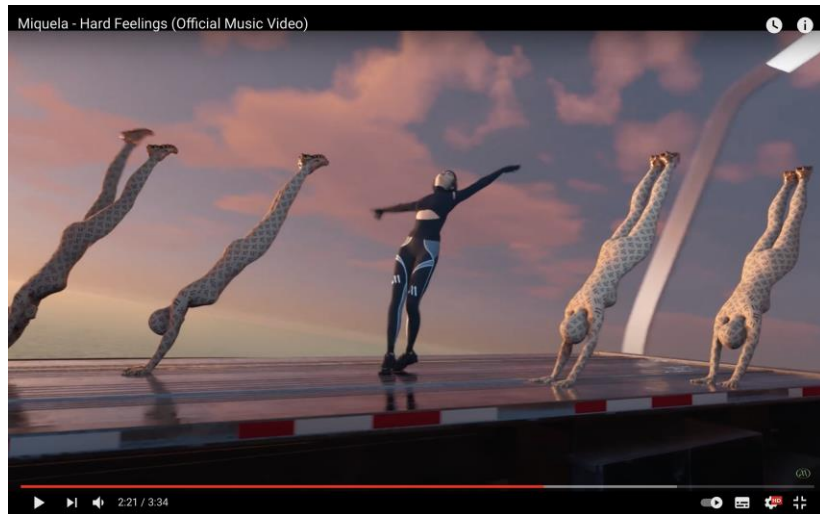
— View replies (1)

kohlekless831 Love kissing you 🤖

93,280 likes
SEPTEMBER 8, 2020

Add a comment... Post

Lil Miquela's Instagram pictures



Lil Miquela's dance choreography in the song "Hard Feelings"⁵



Lil Miquela's acting in the song "Speak Up"⁶

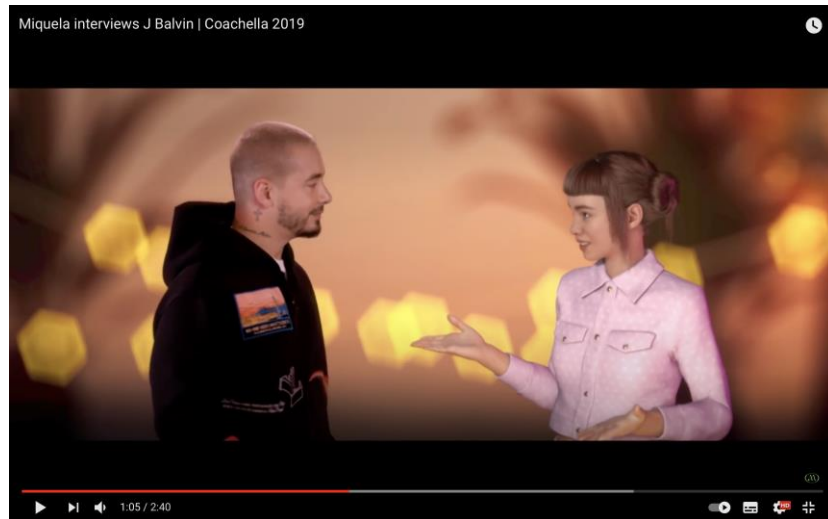
Due to the recent advances in motion capturing, that help the technological actualization of her virtual bodies, Lil Miquela even held a live interview at Coachella Music Festival in 2019,⁷ allowing the audience at home to experience the "telepresence" of Lil Miquela as defined by Auslander.⁸ This live appearance helps with the actualization of her fictional personality, as the audience can see her interact like real human being, instead of being contained to still images.

⁵ Lil Miquela – Hard Feelings Official Music Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39y9dzAwkv4>

⁶ Lil Miquela, Speak Up Official Music Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz8lxRxdwig>

⁷ Miquela interviews J Balvin, Coachella 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-KhO0EqMg0>

⁸ Transmediale. 2011. Digital Liveness: Philip Auslander (US) about digital liveness in historical, philosophical perspective. <http://vimeo.com/20473967>



Lil Miquela interviews J Balvin at Coachella 2019

Discussing performance and liveness, it is important to place virtual performers into the context of performance theory, with Richard Schechner work setting a solid foundation in the field. According to Schechner, “performances are make-believe, in play, for fun.” Performances are “an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more “truthful,” more “real” than ordinary experience.”⁹ Within the definition of illusion being “an instance of a wrong or misinterpreted perception of a sensory experience” or “deceptive appearance or impression”¹⁰, the virtual performer Lil Miquela can be seen as a performance itself - as a long-durational identity performance.

Virtual performers as long-durational identity performers

Between play and ritual, Schechner defines a set of qualities that define a performance as following: First, there needs to be a special ordering of time. Secondly, a noteworthy value needs to be attached to objects that do not necessarily have special value in everyday lives. Thirdly the performance needs to be non-productive in terms of goods, for example of entertaining value. And last but not least, there need to be rules to the play or ritual.¹¹ The last two qualities can be applied to Lil Miquela without a doubt. Her creation is based on entertaining purposes as she is

⁹ Schechner, Richard. Performance Theory. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

¹⁰ Definitions from Oxford Languages.

¹¹ Schechner, Richard. Performance Theory. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

a singer and social media influencer. Her fictional personality is also limited by her characteristics and her actualization, a digital humanoid imitating real humans. She speaks a universal language and expresses herself through human-like facial and body expressions. She does not have superpowers, like Superman. She lives a life that is as close to a real young adult celebrity can be - just to name a few rules that the performance of the virtual character must abide by. The first two qualities that include notions of time and of object value, however, need to be analyzed further. As for now, the existence of Lil Miquela only has a beginning, contrary to the common definition of performances having a start and an end. Still, time is used as a specific element in the performance. It reminds of long-duration performances, in which time is used as a tool, “a medium of expression”.¹² It influences the artistic material, but also affects the identity of the performer itself. Understood as a tool, a medium of expression, time might alter not only the artistic material, but also (under the imperative of endurance) the previous identity of the performer. This leads us to the concept of identity performance.

Non-virtual examples for identity performances can be found throughout the history of performance art. Even Marcel Duchamp created his alter ego Rose Sélavy, a witty pin-up girl making bold provocative statements.¹³ Her public appearances or posing for Man Ray helped with the actualization of her fictional personality.

¹² Tecar, Ana. The Slippages of the Present and the Stage Presence in the Long-durational Performance – A Deconstructivist Perspective in the Context of Post-theory. EKPHRASIS, 2018.

¹³ <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8084/meet-rose-selavy-marcel-duchamp-s-female-alter-ego>



Portrait of Rose Sélavy

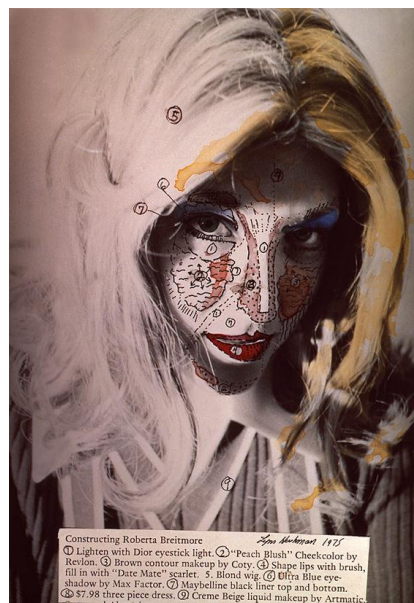
As we can see in the portrait, Rose Sélavy utilizes objects like feathers, lipstick and jewelry to justify her identity and characteristics. These objects, not of any specific monetary value, are essential to the performance of the character. This can be compared to the objects that we see in Lil Miquela's Instagram pictures, in which she uses relatable everyday food and drinks to contribute to the construction of her human identity. This proves Schechner's second quality that define a performance.

However, an alter ego performance should be distinguished from a long-durational identity performance. For this paper, the distinction between an alter ego performance and an identity performance is, that the alter ego can exist next to the regular identity of the artist. The artists demonstrate this ego as a *second* ego to the outside world.¹⁴ The artist is free in choosing to perform between different alter egos, as they desire. An identity performance does not give the option to quit an established performed identity. Identity performance defines as the

¹⁴ Sylvester, Sara. *A Transfictive Tale: Life of the Artist as a Self-brand*. 2016.

“purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity.”¹⁵

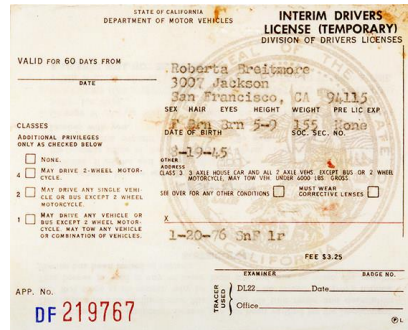
A good example of such a long-durational identity performance is the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson, who lived the life of a fictional character names Roberta Breitmore.¹⁶ Roberta’s performance started with arriving to San Francisco as a depressed young woman, who struggled with her weight. For four years, from 1974 to 1978, Leeson lived primarily as Roberta Breitmore, undertaking real-life activities with the fictional character. She had bank accounts, rented an apartment, saw a psychiatrist, and attended Weight Watchers meetings with the identity of Roberta Breitmore. For four years, Leeson was wearing a wig and dressed in the way Roberta would dress, gesture and speak the way Roberta would. She even got a driver’s license under the name.



Roberta’s Construction Chart 1, 1975

¹⁵ Klein, O.; Spears, R.; Reicher, S. Social Identity Performance: Extending the Strategic Side of SIDE. Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc., 2007.

¹⁶ <https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/roberta-breitmore/>



Roberta's Interim Drivers License

The identity performance ended in 1978 in an exorcism ritual, during which the fictional character was transformed through the elements of fire, water, air and earth. With this performance Leeson not only created a strong standpoint in gender politics, fluidity of identity and feminism.¹⁷

Another good example of a long-durational identity performance can be found in Farid Fairuz, a fictional performance artist. Farid Fairuz started to exist as a fictional biography project created by the artists Mihai Mihalcea in 2009,¹⁸ who started and never stopped performing with his new identity ever since.¹⁹ Farid Fairuz presents himself as a Lebanese medium with expertise in extra-sensorial perceptions, making projects and performances addressing topics to cultural production, religion, sexuality and capitalism.

¹⁷ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-from-joan-jonas-theaster-gates-these-8-artists-fooled-art-world-alter-egos>

¹⁸ <http://www.faridfairuz.ro/bio/fictional-biography/>

¹⁹ <http://archiv.alfredvedvore.cz/en/programme/realia-bucharest-beirut--farid-fairuz?pid=459&bck=program>



Portrait of Farid Fairuz

Farid Fairuz shows the limitless possibilities of becoming a fictional character, by abusing the identity-changing power of performance consistency through time using his auratic presence. As Tecar summarizes, “presence is articulated as a dynamic transformation, which operates on the performer’s consciousness and corporality, involved in a process of endurance.”²⁰

Using the same principle, Lil Miquela started to exist as an Instagram profile in 2016 with her fictional character being performed ever since on social media. One could argue that Lil Miquela is an alter ego of her creators Trevor McFedries & Sara Decou, however time and social media has allowed the independent development of being her own virtual person. Not as controversial as Farid Fairuz, Lil Miquela is still a reflection of the contemporary world. Being a person of ambiguous ethnic background, she addresses her audience in a political way through being a social influencer.²¹ With the takeover of social media in our everyday lives, identity performance

²⁰ Tecar, Ana. *The Slippages of the Present and the Stage Presence in the Long-durational Performance – A Deconstructivist Perspective in the Context of Post-theory*. EKPHRASIS, 2018.

²¹ <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/trevor-mcfedries-sara-decou>

gains a new meaning. Social media platforms like Instagram can be seen as performance stages.²² In fact, through the emergence of social media the definition of identity has changed from being a “pre-determined property of an individual” to a “set of resources which people draw upon in presenting and expressing themselves”.²³ People can “repeatedly co-construct and negotiate” their identity, depending on the context they place themselves in. At the same time, the notion of being “real” changes and requires proof. “Pics or it didn’t happen.” is a common phrase amongst digital natives, as contemporary artist Jesse Darling points out - nothing is real or unreal until its actualization.²⁴ On top of using photos on Instagram to construct her identity, Lil Miquela utilizes her music, videos and interviews²⁵ as part of the identity performance and as part of her actualization.

Conclusion

In the context of performance theory and identity performance, the virtual performer Lil Miquela is of high relevance in the age of digitalization. With social media being more popular with younger generations, than traditionally performance stages like theaters, the importance of it in the context of performance theory cannot be overlooked, giving performance artists new ways of expression. Compared to fictional performers of the performing arts like Farid Fairuz, virtual performers like Lil Miquela use social media platforms like Instagram to stage their identity – a performance of their fictional and virtual selves.

²² Baym, N.K. and Senft, T. What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. Introduction. International Journal of Communication, 2015.

²³ Seargeant, P., Tagg, C.. The Language of Social Media - Identity and Community on the Internet. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

²⁴ Jesse Darling, Alexandra Pirici, Gavin Butt, Claire Bishop – conversation + Q&A, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-3PZvv_jkw

²⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/ba6255d6-4186-11e8-803a-295c97e6fd0b>