Do it for the gram

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Do It for the Gram is a design project concerned with ‘the Second Self’ and fashion on the internet. Here is how Cyborg Anthropology defines the term ‘Second Self’:

The term Second Self is a way of describing one’s online or external identity. In the case of the web, one’s online identity evolves in tandem with offline self. This self, instead of simply a secondary self, is becoming an extension of the self. In the same way that the primary, offline self needs to shower, dress, and maintain the self, so does the online self. ¹

I was fascinated by the role of the Instagram influencer and that became the starting point for my project. Increased use of social media has brought about social change. Big fashion houses, brands and magazines have lost much of their influence to regular people on Instagram and other social media. One reaction to this change has been to hire people with a large social media following to communicate commercial agendas on their Instagram accounts. Since influencers don’t pay for the products they’re hired to show off, they constantly have something new on display. This reinforces the idea that once an outfit or an item is shared publicly it can never be worn again.

With new technologies, I want to propose the possibilities of expressing the self digitally through fashion and style, without the production and purchase of material goods. In my opinion, how the body is dressed or undressed is equally important in the virtual world as in the physical world. However, the virtual body is a technological construct – a cyborg – and is therefore manipulated and perfected much more easily than the biological body. Furthermore, the physical world is not immune to events taking place in the virtual world. On the contrary, the physical is always at stake in, and subject to transformations by way of, the virtual.
2. Process

The process is how I would describe every step that I took to end up where I did. I decided early in the process that I would have to use myself as the subject, since the project is concerned with the performance of the self. I would have thoughts about the topic, and then try and put those thoughts into action. Translation is how I would describe the way I put my thoughts into a visual language and hope for that visual language to spark the same thoughts in others that I had when I created it. Each translation was also a learning process for me, and therefore a part of the process. I found the topic to be very complex, and I had to take many different aspects of it into consideration. I was therefore testing out many different processes and exploring each side of the topic simultaneously.
In the very beginning, I started thinking about the practice of altering images for online use so that they look perfect, while still trying to hide the fact that they have been manipulated. Now there are available multiple photo editor apps for phones, that are way easier to use then Photoshop, for example. Everyone can now alter their own images, before posting them. As an exercise, I tried playing around with photos of myself. I did the typical things the in-phone editors allow you to do, like enlarging the eyes, smoothing the skin etc. I also wanted to be wearing clothing I couldn’t afford, so I tried ‘photoshopping’ an Acne Studio shirt, on top of the image of myself. That didn’t really work since I was already wearing a coat. I ended up with a photo that looked like a paper collage, and myself looking like a doll.
This picture led me to my first translation of the topic. I made my own online representative; a paper doll of myself. A paper doll is a two-dimensional figure cut out of paper, usually complemented by a ‘wardrobe’ of separate clothing, also made from paper. Therefore, I had my picture taken, wearing only underwear and posing in such manner, that I could easily be dressed, like a paper doll. However, this paper doll was not meant to be printed out but was intentionally made for the internet. The digital nature of the paper doll made it easy for me to find new clothing for her online. I would simply visit a designer’s website, save the image of the clothing I wanted and ‘photoshop’ it on top of my paper doll. This gave my paper doll the opportunity to constantly wear new things, without me having to buy a single item. Consequently, I opened an account on Instagram, where I could share her outfits.
My Digital Paper Doll is made from a photograph of myself, and is therefore a copy of myself. A picture of “her” would not be considered a picture of me, even though the only different between a photo of “her” and myself, is the fact that she always stands in the same position with the same facial expression, while constantly expressing herself differently through fashion. The intention of this translation was to question our meaning of authenticity online and critique the fact that we use mass produced material things to express our individual personalities.

Instagram is a photo sharing application and its users post images to tell their stories. However, a digital picture is merely a two-dimensional representation of reality. It is just a front and a cropped frame of what is actually there. In fact, there should be no need for material things to produce a curated digital image of reality.
But why do we need this digital self? A number of studies suggest that the use of social media can have both negative and positive effects on people’s well-being. Social media use has been linked to both depression and loneliness, but also, when embedded within a proper social context, seems to be conducive to better self-esteem and well-being. When a person has a positive experience of expressing their identity in the virtual world, this has been shown to carry over into their physical lives. The same of course goes for negative experiences. Physical and virtual lives are commonly thought of as two disconnected places, but perhaps they should be thought of as one life that exists along a continuum.

The relationship between the physical and the virtual becomes quite visible through the technology of augmented reality (AR). While virtual reality (VR) is aimed at creating reality from scratch, AR is about projecting virtual, computer-generated augmentations, into the real world. Many of us are already engaging with AR on a regular basis, for instance when using face filters. Face filters are a sort of hybrid between make-up and a mask; a digital layer over our faces. Some of those filters, available on social media platforms such as Instagram, are silly and entertaining, while others, so-called beauty filters, are designed to alter a person’s appearance.
Virtual fashion and face filter experiments
Because of my interest in virtual fashion and AR, I started experimenting with face filters. I was fascinated by the notion of designing my own face filter but I had no idea how to make one myself. At first, I was just using them for fun, overlaying a picture of myself with another picture of myself, admiring the uncanny glitches. I started wondering how this would look like in the physical world, so I did some testing. At this point I was trying to learn how to use CLO, which is a fashion design 3D program, that helps you create virtual, true-to-life garments. I took a piece of fabric and placed on a built in Avatar from the program, made the fabric slightly transparent, and then put a picture of myself on top of it. The picture that I used was already me wearing myself as a mask, so now I had an avatar wearing myself, wearing myself as a mask.
In her book, *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson discusses how identities can be expressed through fashion, by tracing the cultural and social history of fashion. Fashion is the visual communication we present to the world through our bodies. It is about the extensions of the body we choose, the clothing, the accessories and so on, and it is about the way we manipulate our bodies. It is our mental expression through our physical selves. This means that fashion is so much more than the clothes we wear. Wilson communicates this lucidly in the following way:

The earliest forms of ‘clothing’ seem to have been adornments such as body painting, ornaments, scarifications (scarring), tattooing, masks and often constricting neck and waist bands. Many of these deformed, reformed or otherwise modified the body.  

As I understand her, our bodies themselves are therefore also fashion. So, my next step, was to literally turn myself into fashion. I again used CLO to construct a face-mask, but did it with a proper pattern this time. I then used the Digital Paper Doll, as a texture for this face-mask, but this time I tried placing it so it would look like a face on top of a face. Finally, I made the mask in the physical reality, so I could then become the Paper Doll, that originally tried to become me.

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At this point in the process, I wasn’t sure if my final translation would be a physical representation of the virtual or a virtual representation of the physical, so I was experimenting with both. I was taking plaster copies of some of my body parts and simultaneously scanning myself with 3D scanners. In the learning process, I did a lot of mistakes as was anticipated, which resulted in sudden malfunctions or faults, or as it is called, glitches. Many people find glitches in computer generated imagery can be aesthetically pleasing, and I agree. For my next translation, I wanted to bring the digital world to the physical world, both in terms of aesthetics and notion.

On social media, we share a curated part of our lives to be consumed by others. We offer a piece of our selves. One important artefact of social media is the selfie. This way of photographing oneself has often been seen as the zenith of self-absorption and narcissism. However, the selfie is not just a symbol of self-absorption, it has for instance become an instrument of emancipation for those who adhere to selfie-feminism, a movement that celebrates the female gaze. I wanted to bring this digital offering of ourselves into the physical world – to offer a physical piece of myself – so I decided to make a cake.

Using a plaster copy of my face I made a silicon mold in which I would bake the cake. I then asked a local bakery to digitally print in marzipan a selfie I had made using a face filter on Instagram. I purposely chose to use a two-dimensional picture on top of my three dimensional form to reproduce the aesthetics of digital glitches that sometime emerge in 3D-scanning and other digital processes.
The selfie cake
3. Final Translation - Second Self Avatar

One way of understanding fashion, is that it allows people to perform their identity by using extensions (clothing, accessories, tattoos, hairdos, piercings, body alterations, gestures, posture etc.) to negotiate with the biological body. But when identity is no longer performed by the biological body, the possibilities increase exponentially. The virtual body is a technological body – a cyborg – and is therefore manipulated and perfected much more easily, than the biological body. How a person is born in the physical world does not need to mean anything in the virtual world. This makes the virtual world a potential safe space for people to explore their identity – and I believe fashion plays an essential role in such exploration. In the virtual world, it matters how the body is dressed or undressed, just as much as in the physical world. Therefore, virtual clothes can be seen as an equally important tool for the fashioning of identity in cyberspace, as it is in the physical world.

I wanted to address the ways in which we attempt to upload our physical selves into the virtual world by making my avatar a perfectly realistic copy of myself. It was important to me that the avatar would look as much like me as possible, to explore further the merging of the two worlds, and how they blur.

The Second self is also useful in the performance of identity. Everything we post online has been thought of, and is therefore curated. Personal style on Instagram has become equally important as fashion has always been and tells us a lot about the way that person sees the world, or themselves for that matter. Every second we spend online has been thought of, and is therefore curated. Personal style on Instagram has become equally important as fashion has always been and tells us a lot about the way that person sees the world, or themselves for that matter.
Avatars are characters or creatures that a person creates to represent themselves in computer games or on the internet. However, recently they have become more visible, by occupying spaces that are normally considered reserved for real life people. One example of this and probably the most famous one is Lil Miquela, a 19-year-old, Brazilian/Spanish influencer with 1.5 million followers. Although she is in fact computer generated, she prefers to be looked at as an individual.

According to the amount of followers she has, and the engagement on her profile, she is clearly influencing real people through her virtual existence, and raising a lot of questions about identity and reality. But she is created digitally from scratch, and is therefore not the representation of an actual human being. So, by having an avatar, that represents an actual human being, I think a lot of the questions she already raises become even harder to answer.

I reached out to a gaming company in Reykjavík, called Myrkur Games, and asked them to help me create my avatar. They are so well equipped that they could make a photorealistic 3D model of me, by splicing together pictures from every angle of my body.
My Second Self avatar posing in virtual fashion
My Second Self avatar posing in virtual fashion
For the final exhibition, I decided to show my two digital selves, in relation to one another. I had made some real-life garments and I decided to show them in the same way that digital objects are often showed. I was standing on a circular rotating platform while being filmed, so each side of me would be visible at some point. I then tried to my best capacity to replicate the physical garments in 3D, and made the same type of video of my avatar, wearing the digital garments. The video would then go back and forth from being a video of me to being a computer-generated image, of me.

This project will continue to be philosophical as long as philosophy is interested in how we define reality and how we perform identity. Having a realistic copy of the self in virtual spaces should raise questions about authenticity on Instagram. For example, if my avatar is in fact a picture of me, then how come it is considered more real for me to post a curated picture of myself, then for me posting a curated picture of my avatar? And if this picture of me, the avatar, is in fact not me, how would it be received if she would do controversial things like digital porn or internet trolling?

In this project, my role as a designer was simply to take existing things and put them in a different context, for us to view in another light. I want my project to raise questions and make people think without forcing any of my own opinions on them.
Stills from the video exhibited in the final exhibition