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Manifestations of Network Identity

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I. MANIFESTATIONS OF NETWORK IDENTITY



Silica (photograph of work in progress)

I discover a crystallized fragment of myself. Pure data, prismatic, synaesthetic, it lays still, yet scintillates and oscillates rapidly. It is a child of both network and earth; it lies in the reverberating space between virtual and reality. In process, not fully formed, it builds toward an unknown terminus.

MANIFESTATIONS OF NETWORK IDENTITY

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Preface

When I began my search almost a year ago for a topic of interest and importance to me as an artist and a student one of the very first ideas I latched on to was a term I coined: cognitons. I saw this term as belonging to the family of elementary particles quantum field theory describes as being like messengers or couriers for the forces of nature. These particles are photons, carrying electromagnetism, gluons, carrying the strong nuclear force, bosons, carrying the weak nuclear force and gravitons, although as of yet unproved, carrying gravity.¹ In this vein, cognitons would be the mediators or messengers of thought, traveling swiftly and silently between the minds of humans and delivering packages of information. In essence, I began to consider human thought as a process governed by connections; each neuron is a vertex in the network of a brain, each brain a vertex in the network of a community, each community a vertex in the global network. Information would work in the same way, with ever expanding networks of ideas.

As I continued my research into these ideas, I became aware that the act of research itself and, at an even more basic level, the simple act of contemplating my goals, was contributing to my thought process. I found that by keeping my goals in mind I was able to begin to draw connections between my varied everyday experiences and my thesis ideas. An instance of this came in the form of my breakfast reading, which was the New York Times magazine. In this particular issue there was an opinion piece entitled “I Tweet, Therefore I Am” by Peggy Orenstein.² This article touched on some interesting

qualities of Twitter and Twitter-like social networking applications—specifically how they forced a blurring of the boundary lines between public and private life, and how they are leading to a new, external construction of identity. Because of my newfound state of mind, my breakfast reading was transformed into important research. I identified with Orenstein’s writing, understanding experientially that in the realm of network technology such as the Internet, identity has become a battleground.

I commonly surf blogs and websites containing art and design work. Long before my thoughts had begun to turn to my senior work, in one of my casual and non-purposeful surfs across the web I found the site of an **artist** and designer who had made himself a large paper head, wearable like a mask, that he had constructed based on a 3D model. This paper head was designed to look like it came from a video game in that the polygons, or structural components of the model, were apparent. When the notion of online and networked environments began to trickle into my consciousness, I remembered and returned to this website and, ultimately, in my artwork the influence of this piece is clear. However, the way in which I first found then returned to this piece brought to light how much more complex and multifaceted the influence of my web surfing was. This artist’s 3D head represents the body of visual knowledge that I have accumulated over my years of web surfing, gaming, and art making that not only resonated with the concept of networked identity for me at the time, but was instrumental at an unconscious level in my arrival at the concept.³

Eric Testroete:

The artist I’m speaking of in this paragraph. The particular project I was influenced by is called “Papercraft Self-Portrait” and was completed in 2009 to be used as a Halloween costume. Testroete was himself influenced by the work of Bert Simons and Haywan Chu, two artists and hobbyists, both of whom use papercraft methods in the majority of their work. Bert Simons in focuses on the human face and head in particular, creating hyper-realistic paper models. Paper modeling itself is a hobby that has been present for many decades, and papercraft is one branch of it. Papercraft is distinct in that it involves the use of 3D modeling in the creation process.³

My frequent and devoted use of digital technology led me to find further support for my ideas in the writing of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian media theorist doing most of his work between the 1960s and 80s. His major career focus was the analysis of electronic media, the changes they enact on perceptions, and how they extend humans senses, especially for the individual and his or her identity. My reading gravitated toward McLuhan's book *The Global Village*, written between 1974 and 1980, but not published until 1989, after McLuhan died. In *The Global Village* McLuhan proposes a new method of media analysis he calls "tetradic analysis" and uses this method to make predictions on the effects of rapidly developing computing technology on the individual and, by extension, society as a whole.⁵

Semiotics:

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols or the study of how meaning is created, not the meaning itself. The most basic concepts of semiotics are the signifier and the signified. The signifier is anything used to represent or convey meaning, such as words on a page or a facial expression, and the signified is the meaning or concept to which the signifier refers.⁴

Jean Baudrillard was a French philosopher and critic of contemporary society, culture and thought. He developed his own idiosyncratic style of writing and expression that, as is the case with McLuhan as well, seems to rely on superlatives and extremes. Although Baudrillard was a very prolific author, I focused mainly on his book *Simulations*, which was published in 1983 and combined elements from his 1981 work *Simulacra and Simulations* and his 1977 work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. *Simulations* is essentially a work of semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols. Specifically, it centers around the idea of the simulacra, or a structure in which all symbolic relation to reality is undermined and seen as a farce. Baudrillard also describes how technology factors

into society's transition to the simulacra and how it affects the individual.⁶

I later discovered that these two authors were major contributors to Postmodern discourse. Postmodernism was the era that came at Modernism's logical conclusion, and as such was in direct opposition to many modernist ideas. Where Modernism proposed more universal and objective truths, Postmodernism believed in subjective or relative truth. While Modernism thought of the world in binaries, Postmodernism thought of the world as plural and complex. Modernism imagined identity as an island—unique, specialized, and built from hard work and effort—while Postmodern identity was socially constructed—created from experiences and connections.⁸ Therefore, Postmodernism is experienced as disjointed and in constant flux.⁹

I soon found how similar the experience of Postmodernism, as described by authors such as Baudrillard, McLuhan, and **Frederic Jameson**, is to my own experience of using network technology. It seemed to me as if networked culture, the culture of the Internet, was the daydream of Postmodernism. The river of information I now experience—wide, deep, and full of internal currents—began as a trickling spring in Postmodernism. It was this extended, expanded, and globalized form of itself that Postmodernism was inexorably moving toward.

My own generation is that of digital natives, having grown up with computers, video games, cell phones, and the Internet. Because of this, our modes of identity construction may seem far too malleable, fluid,

• **Frederic Jameson:**

A literary critic and Marxist political theorist born in 1934 and still alive and working today. He is also noted for his critique of postmodernism in his book *Postmodernism or, the Culture Logic of Late Capitalism*. In his book he lays out useful descriptions of the qualities of postmodernism.⁷

ungrounded, and dispersed from the standpoint of identity values held in the era of modernism and before. Also, as a person relatively fresh out of the woes of adolescence, my interests are still largely in making sense of my self and the world I inhabit.

For these reason, in retrospect, Postmodernism and visual research into my own identity environment were the most logical starting points for my line of thinking. Postmodernism and the Network are full of inconsistencies and non-sequiturs and are shamelessly self indulgent, telling us any connection can be logical and everything depends on our own personal perspective. I hope I can allow my readers and viewers to see why I take network technology and the Internet, as irreverent as it may sometimes be, as seriously as I do and can take part in my inquiry of the subject.

Artist's Statement

Network (capital N):

I use this term to refer to interlinked electronic information exchange technologies as a whole, the beating heart of which is the Internet. This grouping also includes cell phone networks, television networks, offline information databases, and intranets (within corporations, schools, or communities of any sort). However, because all of these technologies now feed into the Internet at some point, my writing still retains it's meaning if the term Network is mentally replaced with Internet.

"The electronic society does not [allow men and women to define themselves by transforming the land]; it does not have solid goals, objectives, or private identity. In it, man does not so much transform the land as he metamorphoses himself into abstract information for the convenience of others. Without restraint, he can become boundless, directionless..."¹⁰

- Marshall McLuhan, *The Global Village*

Formation of identity within the Network

is a struggle between the individual and the crowd.

Although the social structure of the Network was born in postmodernism, it has mutated and branched out into something wholly different.

The human face in the form of a mask-like structure is the central metaphor I use to analyze networked identity because the face is a major component in many forms of identification. The form of the mask is derived from a low-resolution 3D model, and therefore appears planar in structure as if composed of crystal or rough-hewn stone. These planes visualize the rhizomatic mode in which users exist in the Network. Within a network such as the Internet, identity is not formed from a linear progression of events and actions intimately linked to reality, as in historical models of identity construction dating before postmodernism. Instead, identity is formed as a vast, complex and nonlinear aggregation of connections viewed in a relativist manner as in postmodern identity, but extended and transformed.¹¹

In my pieces, I alter the mask structure through four variations to explore different qualities of identity

Rhizome:

A concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The term rhizome is taken from biology, and signifies a structure fundamentally opposed to that of a tree. A tree-like structure is centralized, hierarchical, and linearly connected. A rhizomatic structure is decentralized and simultaneous with no set entrance or exit and not forming a uniform whole.¹²

in the Network. The structure is separated into pieces, emphasizing the data body, or the user as a compilation of descriptive points of information. The structure is elongated, metamorphosed, and repeated as a visual representation of the constant flux and commingling of components of the Networked Identity. The structure is projected upon, referencing the user's constant self-exposure, outsourcing of identity, and the erasure and subsequent simulation of the user within the Network. The structure is flattened, fragmented, and formed into patterns to draw associations to the importance of pattern recognition in comprehending the overload of information brought about by the Network.¹³

I want viewers, or users, of my work to be drawn into and embrace the identity landscape I present. I want them to see the dichotomies of impersonal and personal, virtual and reality, discrete and continuous, and human and machine and consider their implications.

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2. BEYOND POSTMODERN SCHIZOPHRENIA: IDENTITY DECONTEXTUALIZED



Silica

I stare at myself, mesmerized yet frantic as I find fracture after fracture blemishing the surface of my mind. Contradictions, logical loops, broken lines, discontinuous surface—what exactly am I looking at? Facets and shards, some virtual, vibrant, brash with color, constructed outside myself and some delicate, filled with sense, intimate, constructed within—which pieces are mine? The questions themselves begin to vibrate. Rattle; shatter; disperse.

Beyond Postmodern Schizophrenia: Identity Decontextualized

“What may emerge as the most important insight of the twenty first century is that man was not designed to live at the speed of light. Without the countervailing balance of natural and physical laws, the new video-related media will make man implode upon himself...receiving data at enormous speeds...from all areas of the world, the results could be dangerously inflating and schizophrenic. His body will remain in one place but his mind will float out into the electronic void, being everywhere at once in the data bank. Discarnate man is as weightless as an astronaut but can move much faster. He loses his sense of private identity because electronic perceptions are not related to place.”¹

-Marshall McLuhan, *The Global Village*

Semiurgy: Semiurgy (Semiurgie) is a French neologism used in Postmodern discourse, particular that which is concerned with mass media. The term is a combination of two roots: semi[o]- meaning “sign”, and -urgy meaning “work”. The term is associated with a sense of shallowness or nihilism—an association apparent in Baudrillard’s use of the word. Baudrillard bases his use of the word on McLuhan’s idea of the message, or the ways in which media manipulate and work upon the senses.¹⁵

In postmodern discourse, the psychological illnesses schizophrenia and panic disorder are used as metaphors to describe the Postmodern condition. The symptoms of these disorders mirror, to a certain extent, the ways in which Postmodern humans experience the world. Schizophrenia and panic essentially refer to a decontextualized state, or the idea of radical **semiurgy**, as described by Jean Baurillard. The terms have been expanded and mutated in the context of Networked culture in the era of the Internet, and can be used to understand the character of a networked identity.²

Radical semiurgy can be described as follows:

“[representation] starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Conversely, simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of

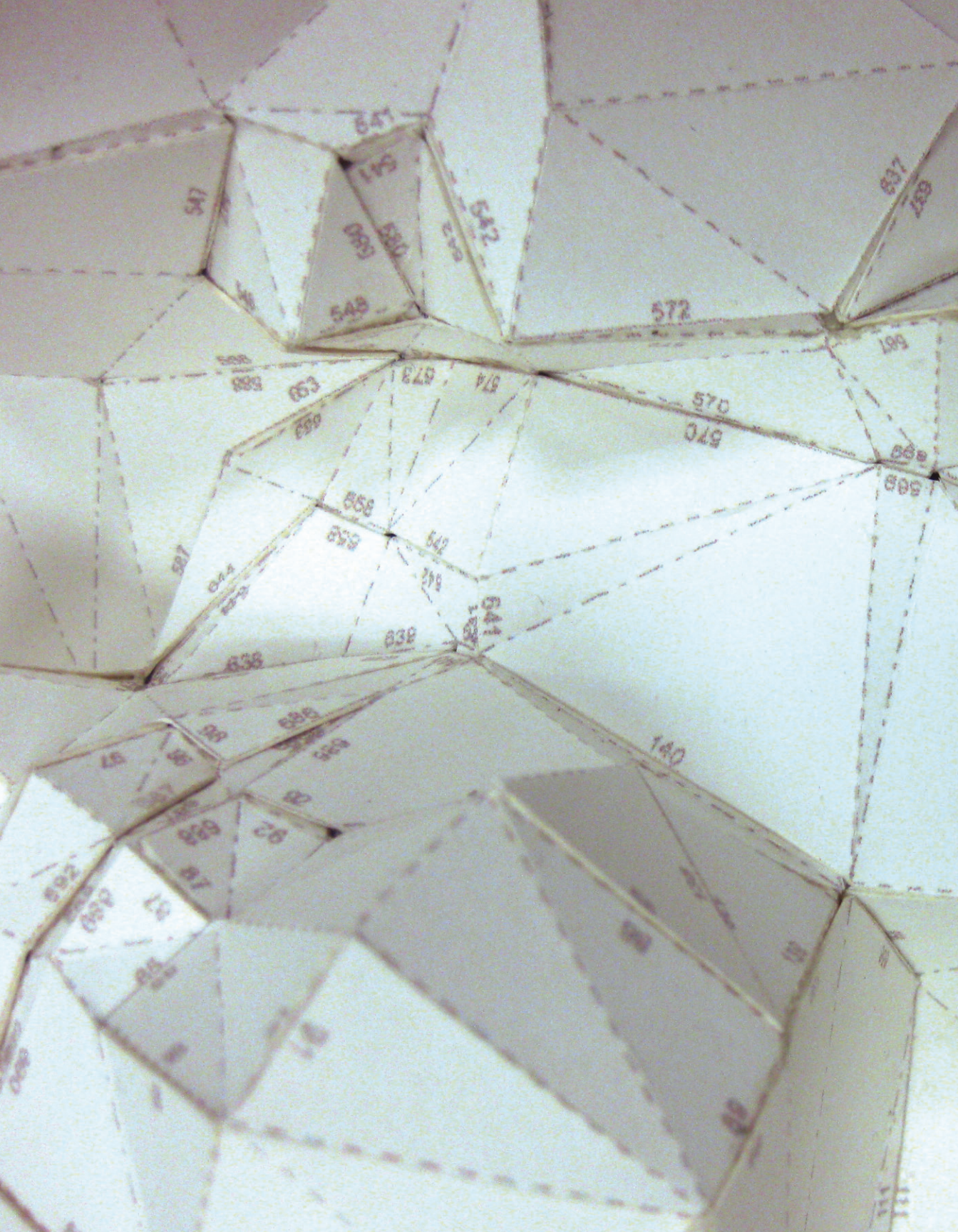
the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference.”³

In essence, what Baudrillard describes here is a breakdown of normal semiotic structure. In the field of semiotics every object is broken down into a signifier—an object or a written or spoken word—and a signified, which is the meaning or referent of the signifier. The signified is often seen as some form of reality or truth guaranteeing the efficacy and value of the sign system. However, in radical semiurgy there only exists an infinite regression of self-reference in which each signifier does not refer to a truth, but only to another signifier, and so forth into infinity. It is the complete undermining of reality and representation; both reality and representation are considered to be themselves simulacra and reality is replaced with the hyperreal. This unfathomable fracturing of reality and, by extension, the self is experienced as schizophrenia and panic.⁴

Frederic Jameson describes the metaphor of schizophrenia as the “experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up in a coherent sequence.”⁵ The schizophrenic human loses context in a number of ways. Thoughts become disjointed and boundaries between ideas—historical, cultural, and otherwise—break down. Historical context, or past and future, are lost and with them the ability to experience or conceptualize the progression of the **self over time**. Schizophrenic humans are stranded on an island of perpetual, intensified present. In the schizophrenic condition the event of one’s birth is dissolved, including

Blade Runner:

The essay from which this information was taken is called *Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner* and is by Giuliana Bruno. One section of Bruno’s essay describes the replicants from Blade Runner—a race of robots made to look and act exactly as humans do but with decreased lifespans. The replicants, because of this decreased lifespan, live violent and intense lives constantly and energetically engaged with the present and separated from the rest of humanity. Not born into a family, lacking a home, and lacking a history the replicants are lost in their own context-less lives. Bruno associates the life of replicants with the idea of postmodern schizophrenia.



"Grain Shift" (close detail):

I attempt to define myself by folding inward deeply and using what I find there, but each time I locate a shining vertex, my inner collapses and I am outward again. I attempt to define others by folding outward, but each time I locate a salient vector it runs in a loop and I am inward again. As facing mirrors shatter the individual to pieces, each piece the same yet uniquely different, so my self enters infinite self-reference, and from it emerges a fractured prism, beautiful and unfathomable.

the location of origin, or home. In postmodernity, one is geographically and temporally uprooted, bringing about a sense of loss of identity.⁶

Panic disorder, in a very basic sense, is a response to an overpowering stimulus, and as such elaborates on the “metaphor” of schizophrenia. Arthur Kroker, a postmodern theorist, created the metaphor and considers it a sort of “cultural burnout” or a rapid and destructive influx of social and cultural activity. It is as if society has finally ended its drug habit with overdose. In other terms, postmodern panic is the experience of a hallucinogenic intensification of the present in which everyday life is lived as if it were overwhelming or an emergency. In place of a single stream of related stimuli the mind is confronted with a constant, vast, and various inflow of information with no identifiable source or purpose. As Gary Genosko states, it is “synonymous with contemporary life lived as a catastrophe in the ruins of the end of the century”⁷

Both panic and schizophrenia are used to describe Postmodernism, an era now becoming so expanded and bloated as to be unrecognizable with its transformation into Networked culture. The character of the postmodern human can be used to understand that which he is transforming into. Panic and schizophrenia have the additional connotation of a departure from the everyday. In postmodernism these departures become the everyday, and can thus no longer be labeled as departures.⁸

However, the panic of everyday life, departure or not, can only be called such if the memory of a time without an intensified present still remains. In a networked

society, humankind has not only settled into a panicked life, but does not remember a time when a state of non-panic or non-schizophrenia existed. Networked life is lived in a time when Kroker's social catastrophe has come, gone, passed beyond history and entered the realm of myth. The ruins of the previous century are long since buried and decomposed, yet still easily exhumed with knowledge of the Network's functions.⁹

In this way a networked human can be seen as a kind of nomad—boundless, groundless, itinerant, and free from the gravitational pull of all things like the Voyager satellite which, after finishing its mission, was sent to spend its remaining days adrift at the edge of space. In this state, a person is not only disconnected from geographical and temporal home, but has passed beyond the concept of home entirely. The idea of home and origin are removed from the lexicon, and are no longer in the sphere of reference of a networked human. Modern life reverses into a life like the **Paleolithic age** before agriculture, when humans were itinerant. Modern humans oscillate between a fragmented present and past, and the only unifying factor is constant motion.

The act of watching television serves as practical illustrations of the transition from postmodern schizophrenia and panic to networked culture. The realm of television has long been a dictatorship; the viewer, although able to choose between a variety of channels, is restricted to watching what the television networks choose to show. The viewer lounges as the television flashes disjointed images and sound, text and photos

Paleolithic Age:

Also known as the pre-historical Stone Age, this age was characterized by the spread of humanity from the region of east Africa to the rest of the world. In this age humans were itinerant, mainly motivated by the need for food, shelter and clothing. The thoughts of Paleolithic humans must have been strange compared to our own—moving with little sequence or singularity in discontinuous patterns. As the age progressed humans began the construction and use of stone tools, culminating in the development of settlements and agriculture and leading to a shift in the conception of identity.¹⁶



Gravity Sigil (photograph of projected video)

First I skirt the edges looking, assessing, probing. I extend an intent gaze, a finger, an arm, my face, and see: it appears to be the edge, yet here I find the core. I easily connect, it swiftly receives and I am fascinated, diving headlong. Connect, connect, connect with no step back...and what is this place I inhabit now? Each push and its boundaries expand, yet boundaries they remain. I am trapped in complete freedom, flitting through beautifully built ruins. I am in a coma yet violently hallucinating, seeing the dead and decomposed become reanimated, then and die again. I calmly and silently scream.

Left and Right Hemispheres:

McLuhan writes extensively in *The Global Village* on the topic of the left and right brain and how native cultures or “pre-literates” as he calls them have a right brain bias and westerners have a left brain bias. According to McLuhan, one of the major factors in the Western left brain bias is the development and use of the phonetic alphabet, which necessitates the logical and linear lining up of letters to form words, sentences and, ultimately, meaning. The alphabet then opened the doors for further left brain development in many areas from mathematics and science to city planning and architecture. McLuhan and advocates a realignment of the Western brain bias with a mental center; a consideration of both left brain right brain information and qualities in concert.¹⁷

rapidly at him or her, and he or she becomes confused, even panicked—what is the viewer to do in the face of this forced and overwhelming experience? However, television has evolved and the viewer now has more say in what he or she watches. With DVR technology, online television, and television sets being more and more integrated with networking technology, the user can now actively and willingly subject themselves to this disjointed media flow. For this reason, the experience has gone beyond any sense of panic, for it is now long since an everyday matter. Video, text, image, sound, and color are all transmitted in a unified, continuous, synaesthetic stream to the user and, to an increasing extent, by the user. While the user may seem to turn inward, their consciousness is actually expanded into Network.¹⁰

McLuhan suggests that the Postmodern experience, and therefore the network experience, may even show itself with a change in the way our minds function. It is a well-established theory in neuroscience that the brain is split into **two hemispheres** and each of these hemispheres handles different mental functions.¹² The left brain handles language, math, and logical or analytical thought processes while the right brain handles music, spatial abilities, and non-analytical, simultaneous thought processes. When watching television, surfing the Internet, or producing art our thoughts are dominated by the right brain.¹² Herbert Krugman, as quoted by McLuhan, describes this phenomenon:

“...the ability of respondents to show high right brain response to even familiar logos, their right

brain response to stories even before the idea content has been added to them, the predominantly right brain response to TV, and even perhaps to what we call print advertising—all suggests that in contrast to teaching, the unique power of the electronic media is to shape the content of people's imagery, and in that particular way determine their behavior and their views.”¹¹

The shaping of content is a key notion to the functions of the right hemisphere of the brain, as described by McLuhan, and its relationship to Networked culture. In analytical, left-brain thinking information is condensed until understanding is arrived at, as a cone (a body of information) condenses into a point (a single, concrete decision). In simultaneous and abstract right brain thinking, however, one does not arrive at understanding at all. Information is processed and filtered into a shape or essence that, as soon as it is described using language, exits the realm of the right brain altogether.¹⁴

If our minds are being fundamentally altered by our frequent interaction with network technologies, even seemingly trivial ones such as Facebook, what implications does this have for our lives outside the Network? If, as McLuhan postulates, all media and technologies are extensions of our natural human functions, can these extensions eventually overtake our bodies, or become so integrated that removal would be impossible? It seems possible that at some point in the near future there may be no life outside the Network. Already we are effectively using technology as a cyborg would, manipulating images and data with the computer mouse as our mechanical hand and calling out to friends with a text message as our voice.

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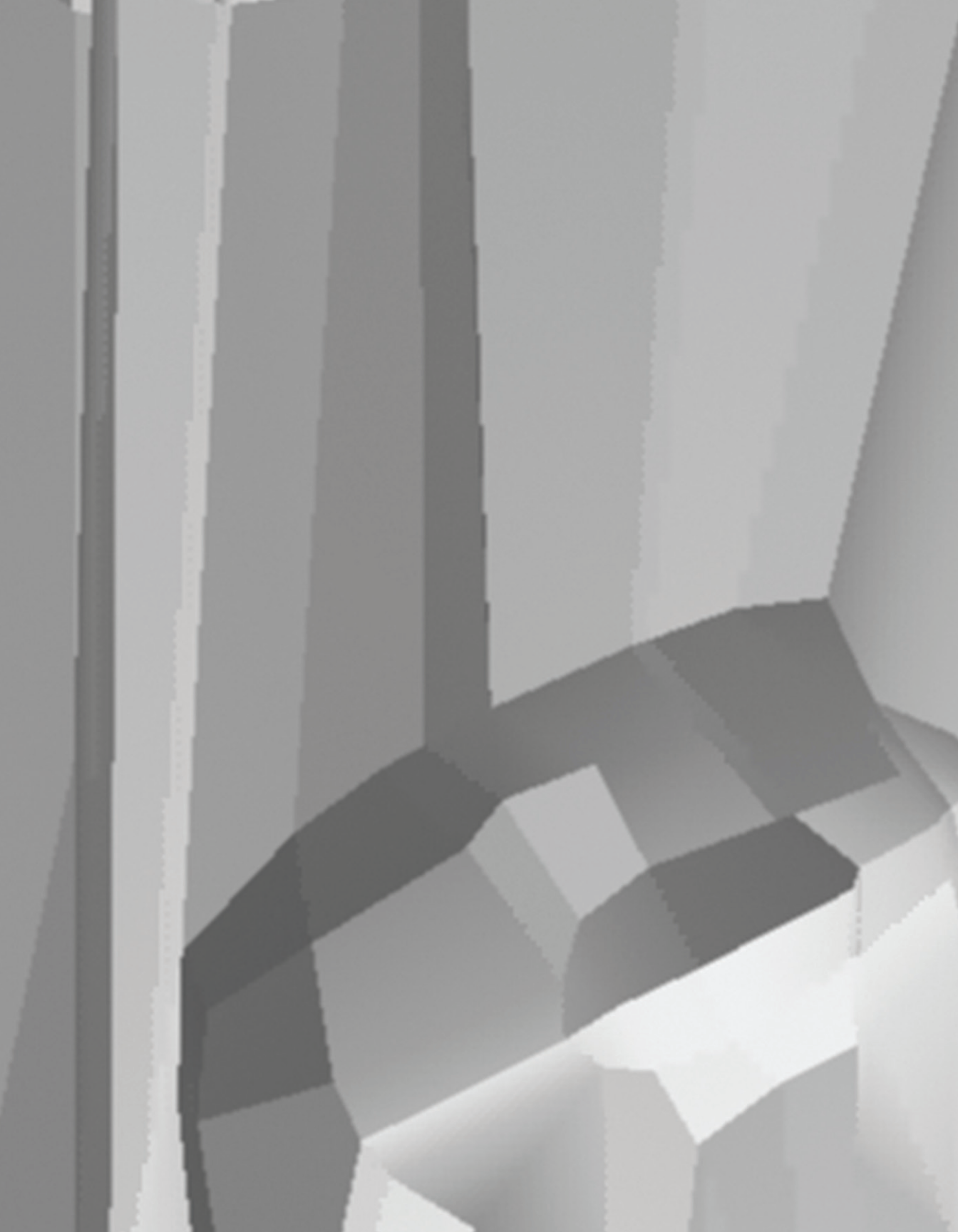
Study for Silica (close up)

Emergent are the instructions from which my digital self is formulated. Mathematical equations and formation rules define me—travel to this point at that rate, split into five, separate and bend, reattach. I seek and follow these mathematical clues and find the creator to which they lead, yet when I arrive I find the creator is again my self. I attempt to escape this digital dream, but instead loop around and fall back into the net, ensnared as a dream catcher ensnares a nightmare.

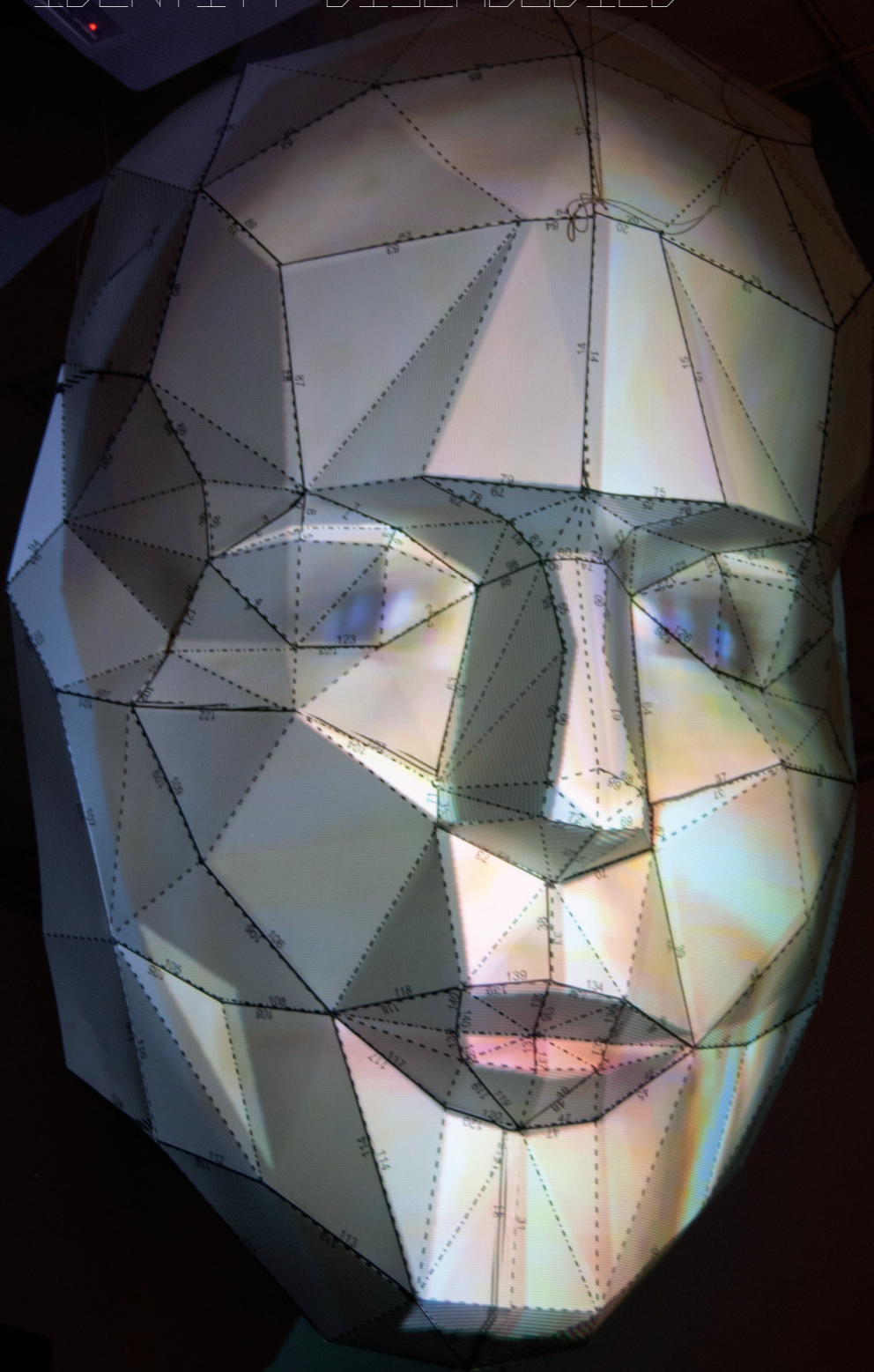
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17. McLuhan 52-55, 58



3. IDENTITY DISEMBODIED



Gravity Sigil

I see and reflect on my network as if outside of myself. It is imposing and overshadowing, floating above and looking down upon my individuality. I am blinded and obscured—do I have power? And from where does it stem? My network leads me inexorably to surrender my physical body so it can capture and reform it within the data and information from which it is composed. I am lost within its clutches, my essence drawn out of me as if by the gravity of some magical talisman.

Identity Disembodied

“It is also possible through deep meditation to put time out of existence and to see all the life that was and is and ever will be as if they were all simultaneous...”¹

-Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

The Network brings about a projection or disembodiment of the user and his or her identity.

When presenting oneself on the Internet, a user necessarily has to extract pieces of information about oneself and reproduce them online. The term for the amalgamation of this reproduced information on the user is *data body*. The creation of a data body affords the user a number of previously unavailable freedoms, but potentially at a cost.

A data body brings about a radical contraction of history and memory. Events and information that have been surrendered by a user of the Internet or a social network about their life, voluntarily or involuntarily—origin, past events, future goals, adventures, friendships, and so forth—are reproduced and presented in virtual space. Although these data are not all present in one virtual location, they are accessible at near-instantaneous speeds, contracting their **timescale** and virtual distance. A user can access a video of their best friend when they were a child and seconds later view written information about the same friend's hopes for the future, as if the temporal space between them does not exist. There arises a disconnect between events and all the effort, obstacles,

Timescale:

Timescale is the scale at which an event or activity is measured. The concept is a fairly straightforward one, but with a wide range of applications. For example, nuclear timescale estimates the lifetime of a star and can measure trillions of years,¹¹ geological timescale measures the lifetime of the Earth and measure billions of years,¹² while computing timescale can measure all the way down to trillionths of a second.¹³

and accomplishment that led up to them; the events' potential meanings and complexities are lost. In essence, time and memory are spread out before the user as an image projected on a screen, on which the user may freely move. Through indexing and archiving in databases, the progression of our personality and character is no longer a progression; it can theoretically be present simultaneously and in its entirety.²

~~Databases, while in the past have tightly bound~~ the user to particular parameters, now lend the user and their data body additional freedom. The databases of social networks often organize data using the prompt by which it is collected: "What are your favorite movies?" "Where did you grow up?" "What is your username?" "Upload your user image." The networked individual is transformed into a series of quanta, pixels, or data points which are often beyond their obvious control.

However, the trend of database technology is toward listening to the desires of the user:

"Database philosophers were once deeply concerned about how field character limits — the number of letters that would fit on each line in the electronic form — would impoverish the self, just like bureaucracy turned people into numbers. People could not describe themselves in such short, mandatory lines. Now there are suggested fields, longer character limits, and free text spaces, with prospects for a more expansive self! The database has more memory. 'Other,' that last heading available on the form, standing for anomaly, has become 'add category,'

Database:

An extremely prevalent mode of collecting and storing data. Database technology is used on the web to hold user information, such as usernames, passwords, and other profile information and are able to output the correct information if asked, or *queried*. A more familiar application of databases may be Microsoft Excel documents; Excel documents essentially look the same as an online database.¹⁴

helpfully offering a moment of self-definition. The database is warmer, reaching out, asking for more of you.”³

Microblog:

A microblog, previously called a tumblelog, has all the properties of a blog, but intensified and shrunk in scale. Where a blog is conducive to daily posts of moderate length, a microblog is a rapid flow of brief and often discontinuous information posted in a stream of consciousness manner. Twitter is the most characteristic and popular of the microblogs and even goes to the extent of enforcing a 140 character limit on posts. Posts are also not limited to text and frequently users will post a single photo or video with no description or context. These qualities of the microblog create a frenetic and fast paced environment of self-exposure, trend setting and trend seeking; ideas and information are ejected, reflected, and intermingled at a speed that defies analysis and, frequently, comprehension.¹⁵

Users are able and encouraged to distinguish their “true selves” from their dictated selves, their public from their private selves. Users create their own database categories or post in blog or **microblog** format about themselves in applications such as Twitter or Facebook. The user gains real freedom from the realization that their “true self”, when represented as data, is only anchored by the extent to which their virtual information can be tied back to their physical identity or, perhaps more importantly, whether their physical identity actually takes priority. For some, interaction with the Network may be so frequent and involved that their physical identity becomes secondary. This is a possibility particularly with those who engage in online gaming communities.⁴

But does the user, in actuality, gain more control through the use of a data body? The individual may lose control by being wired to the constantly fluctuating networked archive. In addition, in monetized social networking applications in particular, control moves in the direction of becoming a façade rather than an actuality in order to allow money to be made.

The amount a user can control their own data body can be viewed as dependent on the extent to which

the Network is an **open archive**. For the user the purpose of projecting themselves into the Network through database entries and blog posts is to gain access, and thereby become a constituent of, the vast quantity of information in the Network. For a human being, the first step in the process to becoming a data entity is accessing the Network, for access represents the first strand being woven in a soon-to-be web of connections. The contents of the data body of any individual and its boundaries are, however, unclear at varying levels because of the inevitable commingling with other users' data bodies. An example of this is many types of media blogs, to the extent that they represent their author's identity and interests. The authors of these blogs stray from being authors at all; many produce little of their own content and instead aggregate, remix, or quote the work of others.⁵ In this way, each data body is composed of data that are pieces of other data bodies, which in turn are composed of fragments of others. Therefore, if the Network is an entirely closed, self-referential system the user is not introducing new information and thus has limited control over their data body.

• **Open Archive:**

An open archive is what its name implies: an electronic, networked archive or database in which the aim is to allow complete and unrestricted access to information—the ultimate form of which would be an easily accessible central database containing the whole of human knowledge. This includes restriction by authority, lack of means or tools, and lack of understanding. In the words of the Open Archives Initiative, an advocate for this cause, the aim of an open archive is to “develop and promote interoperability standards that aim to facilitate the efficient dissemination of information.”¹⁶

In some ways the Network as a whole can be viewed as a data body without a real-world, physical identity. The Network has tendencies and phases, desires and whims. This is due in large part because of the imposing, undeniable presence of the mother of all archives, the

hive queen of the Internet: Google or, more specifically, Google's search engine. Google and services like it have become the core of the Internet because they consolidate the information on the Internet, and therefore afford users a much easier means of accessing the wealth of information present there. However, Google does not view all her children in equal light; the algorithm behind Google's search engine is called the PageRank algorithm, and it measures the relative importance of items or pages within the Network. Therefore, that which the user creates can be swept away by the prevailing Network currents generated by Google's rankings.⁶

The prioritization of archived data such as that perpetrated by Google is compounded by the motivation of profit. Owners of monetized network applications have shifted their business model from a top-down method of dictating what the user needs to a bottom-up focus on the user as an individual with specific desires.⁷ With this focus, commercial network applications hope to entice the user into self-reference. In the cycle of self-reference, the users reflects on themselves, assesses what is there, and output this assessment or enact changes. When this process is performed within commercial applications, however, the applications quietly slip between the assessment and output steps, archive what is found there, and use the information to sell products to the user.⁸ In essence, the users is marketing products to themselves.



Grain Shift (full view of virtual version)

Ah, here it is, my true self, my ideal web of bits. Or perhaps is my self contained in this combination? Or this? Each time I seem to locate it, it shifts and changes as if governed by unseen currents. I glance around me and notice the shifts, each other around me, each link in my chain shifts in the same moment with the same motion building and building into a fantastic wave. Blur and stop, blur and stop—the constant motion only seems to slow when I follow it along just as rapidly.

McLuhan prophesied this in 1989 in his book *The Global Village*:

“...[Corporations] will emphasize diversity on a regional basis as their ultimate weapon. The private user (someone who utilizes special home or commercial information services) will be their prime target. The accumulation of large and sophisticated data bases in the late twentieth century will produce planetary home/commercial high-speed information services...”⁹

In the name of capitalism, these applications effectively create a type of Orwellian police state, monitoring and censoring user activity constantly. Users are given the illusion control, and yet all is watched and archived for future sale. The reach of social networking applications goes beyond the scope of their own websites as well, as is the case with the Facebook “like” button present on websites other than Facebook, even tracking users who choose not to engage in the social networking experience.¹⁰

However, is this privacy infringement a wholly new or unhealthy development? Corporations have been exploiting consumer psychology since the advent of print advertising. Perhaps the difference now is how constantly, publicly, and unapologetically corporations are co-opting consumer desires. If one disagrees with advertising in this way, it arguably equates to a generalized disagreement with contemporary capitalist culture. Perhaps the only real crime against network users is the lack of knowledge and,

Facebook “Like” Button:

The Facebook “Like” button is a feature that was introduced to the website in 2009 and allowed users to “like” the posts of their friends.¹⁷ This function was then expanded to include community and company pages, and later on, web locations outside of Facebook entirely. This final step of the “like” button seems the most controversial and intrusive because it allows Facebook to cast its information gathering net many times wider than it was before, creating potential privacy issues.¹⁸

by extension, choice given to them. Consider that modes of accessing network information, such as Internet browsers, are also owned by corporations, that these corporations are archiving browsing information from their users and, most importantly, that methods of completely opting out of allowing one's data to be archived are not made obvious. Applications in the Network provide us with valuable tools, but shouldn't we know what we are providing in return?

If creativity is understood to be the ability to forge unexpected connections and also understood as a fundamental aspect of identity, then the data body is ultimately a positive and powerful identity-forming tool. Despite each of its limits the point still remains that all censorship and efforts to limit control within the Network are only effective within the plots of data that private corporations have claimed for their own. Theoretically, access to the full scope of information present on the public Internet is free and unrestricted. The great amount of control and access gives the user the possibility to commingle and constantly update, each user continually morphing and hybridizing data to form a virtual identity of truly distinguished character.

Despite this potential for complexity, if taken alone and without a corresponding physical body, is a data body a sufficient or satisfactory form of identity? Cultures throughout the world identify themselves by their mythology, religion, and spiritual practice often intimately

connected to physical land. Within the Network, especially in social networking, users sketch out their identities over and over, constantly creating and recreating themselves with new information. While a person with a homeland, a spirit, and a culture might have a core identity carved from stone, a human in the Network carves his or hers from water or air. A physical, spiritual human might die and have the spirit of their name and identity live on unchanged. A networked individual slowly appears within the Network, formed from dense clouds of data coalescing grain by grain, like cosmic dust forming into a star. Even after the individual's physical body is long since buried, bits and bytes of information remain about him to be looted by other users. If a virtual human possesses the freedom to view the vast diversity of collective memory in simultaneity, as the introductory quote to this section describes, does it hold any meaning or purpose if that human has no spirit or soul?



Silica (process photograph of pieces before construction began)

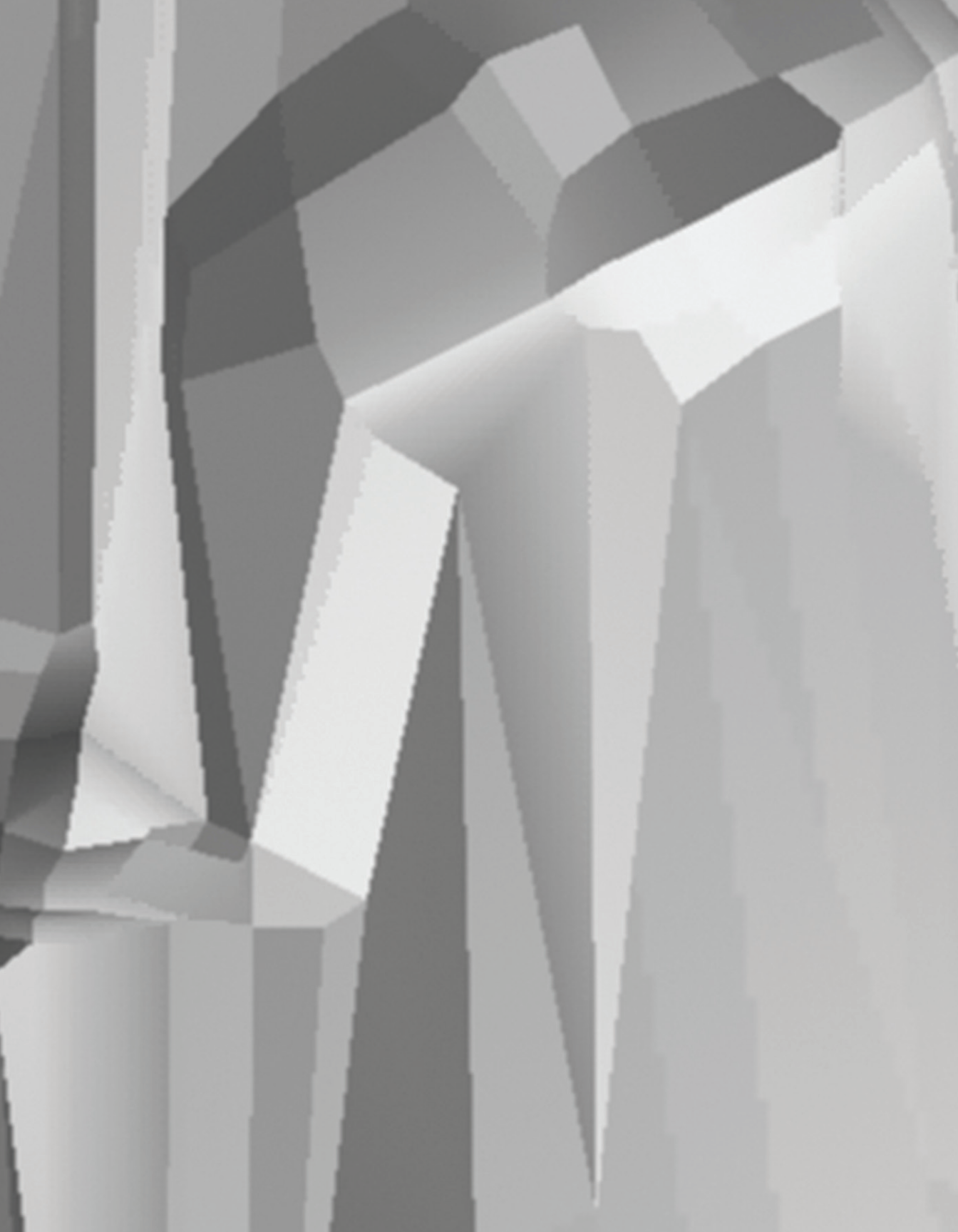
I continuously shuffle and sort, rearrange and repurpose yet the pattern I seek seems never to emerge. Forms arise and move as I reorient my parts, yet as I focus upon them they sink back into the digital waves. They flit like fairies in a forest, dense and shifting with light and air. What are these elusive beings that float before me, so obvious and common to my physical self yet so foreign and elusive to my digital self?

Notes

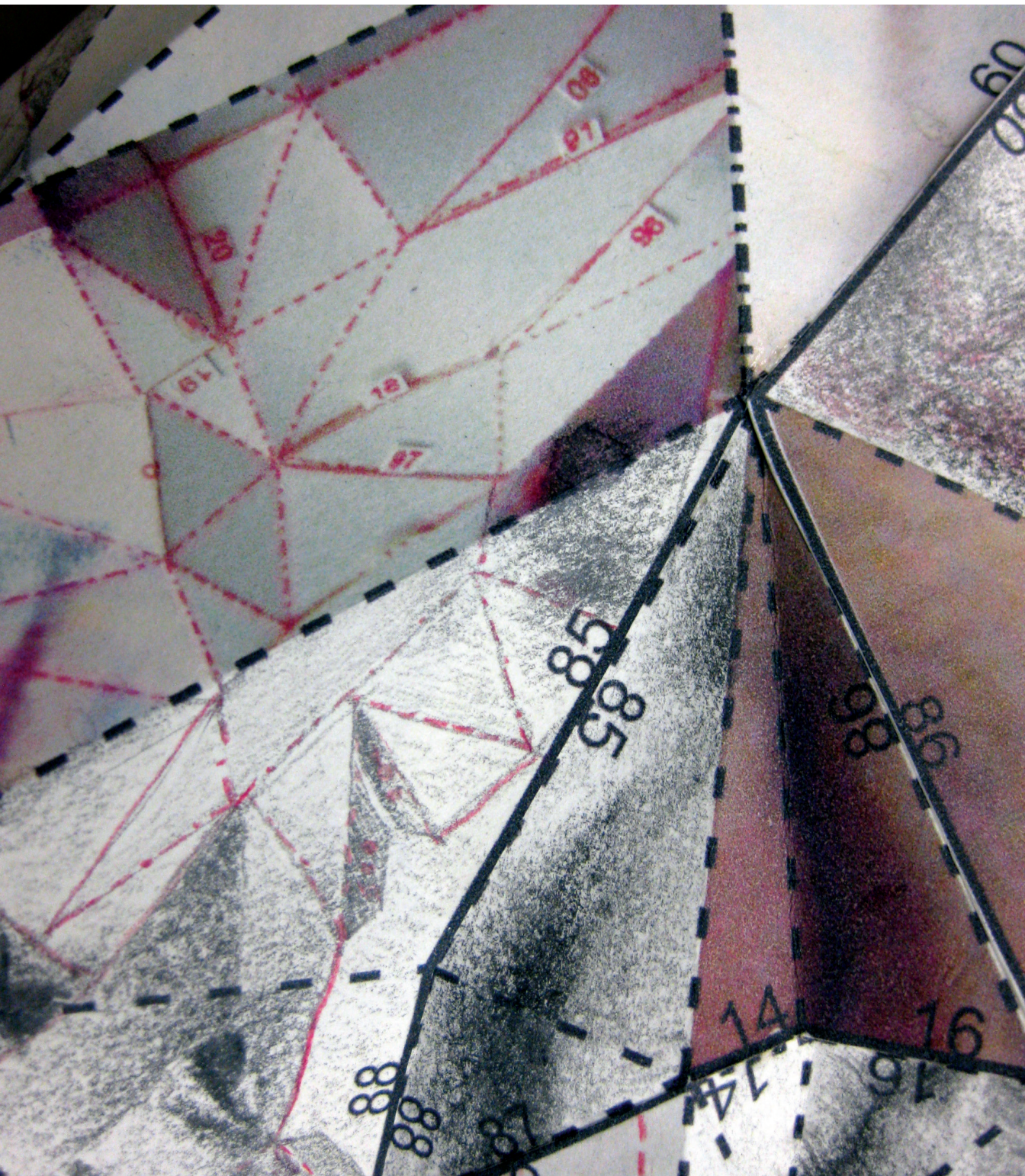
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4. NETWORK AND ACCESS: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY



Silica (close up)

The object lays in wait for me to examine it. It looks up and out at me, and I look across at it: a benign object, strange and quiet. I examine it closer, and find the facets of its surface defy my senses. Each plane of its face is a threshold to another level, another multitude of complex planes, each of which leads to it's own inner space. This vision bursts upon me and the object expands and deepens to infinity like a fractal, spiraling and snapping.

Network and Access: Collective Identity

“...all persons, whether or not they understand the processes of computerized high-speed data transmission, will lose their old private identities. What knowledge there is will be available to all. So in that sense, everybody will be nobody.”¹

-Marshall McLuhan, *The Global Village*

At its very basis, interaction with the Network necessitates, to a certain extent, giving up one's personal identity in favor of an impersonal one. This concept is based primarily on the idea presented by Marshall McLuhan in *The Global Village* that as the boundaries to global communication become increasingly low, as they have in networked environments, cultural diversity is reduced or imploded. In other words, as the introductory quote suggests, when a diversity of information is available to all, no one is unique because of possession this information.

In 1989 when McLuhan wrote the above quote and presented the above ideas, although the Internet was in existence and well on its way to reaching widespread popularity, it was still owned by the U.S. government, leaving television and offline computing as the primary information networks. Television allowed easier access to multimedia, multicultural information, but not nearly to the extent allowed by the Internet. Therefore, McLuhan's statement was largely a grand prediction based on the trends of electronic technology at the time.²

However, McLuhan's predictions proved to be true to a surprising extent. The Internet multiplied the

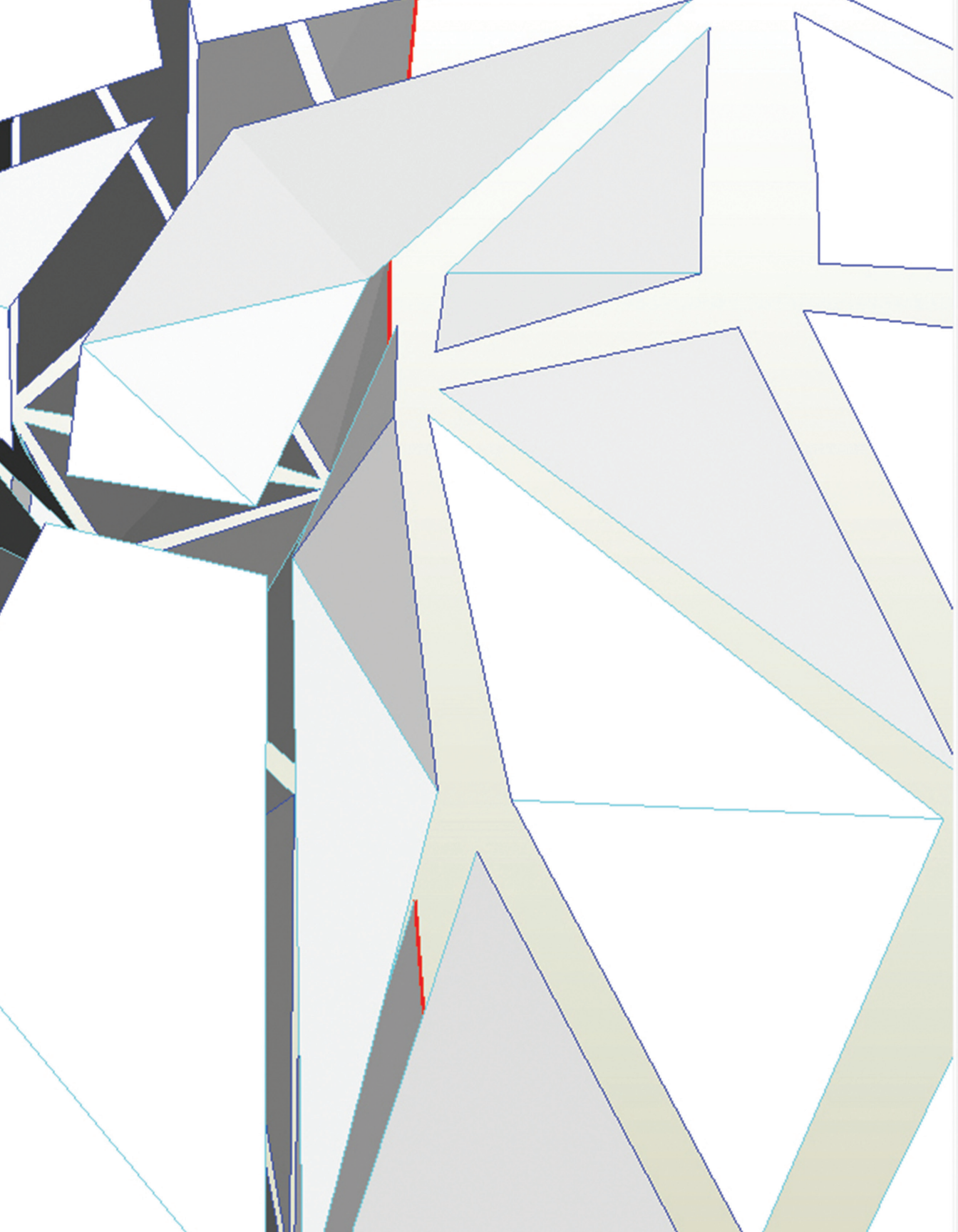
availability and diversity of information provided by television and offline computing by bringing on-demand information. As the Network forged connections and built up its web across the globe, the physical, temporal, and cultural distance between people was condensed, or imploded. Then, with the advent of broadband technology this information became, for the purposes of an individual, human mind, nearly limitless and instantaneous. If a person desires to travel from Connecticut to China it might take fifteen or more hours by plane, but using Google it takes one fifth of a second. In the Network the user's consciousness is projected upward and outward into an invisible whole-earth overlay, transmitting the user's ephemeral self at near-light speed. Therefore, regardless of the culture, status, historical, and familial background from which an individual comes, the Network, as it continues to expand, holds the potential for overshadowing the individual in a vast diversity and collectivity of information.

This phenomenon can be illustrated with Alan Liu's concept of a "monoculture of diversity".³ The monoculture of diversity seems to describe a contradictory notion, and yet is illuminating within the context of the Network. The concept indicates that when all people are diverse and different, this diversity becomes a constant. Simply put, if everyone is diverse and interesting, then no one is. Liu focuses on the changes of structure within networked corporations to describe this concept:

"The deinstallation of assembly lines pegged to classified occupations has its analog in the deinstallation of "linear

Alan Liu:

Alan Liu is a professor of English at University of California, Santa Barbara and is affiliated with the university's Media Arts and Technology graduate program. He began research and writing in information culture to draw connections between literary knowledge and technological knowledge. His book *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* he discusses the role of information technology in the development and practice of knowledge with a particular focus on corporate culture and its effects on the culture of cool.¹³



Screenshot from Pepakura Designer (software used for creating instructions for building paper models)

From a particular point of view, I can see my fractured self expanded, separated, exploded into shards, each my own yet foreign, linked only by digitally charged airspace. Each time I dissolve myself into virtual space my substance leaps across some gap like an electrical arc. What is this space between, this resonating unresolved?

process flows” pegged to professional identities. Where once work flow proceeded in distinct, ordered stages of design, engineering, manufacture, distribution, sales, and so on, such that the underlying group identities of workers came to be overlaid by discreet professional identities, now “concurrent engineering,” “design for manufacture,” and “point of sale” intervention have scrambled everything up.”⁴

Seth Godin:

A prolific writer and entrepreneur focusing on technology and Internet companies and topics. The source I used is a talk for the TED conferences Godin gave in 2009 called The Tribes We Lead. The talk concerned the microcommunities, or tribes, we create for problem solving and how this mode came about largely as a result of network technologies. Also, he discusses how this formation of tribes is different from top-down method with which we used to solve problems.¹⁴

What Liu is discussing here is the flattening or implosion of professional identities. In the assembly line model, or Taylorism⁵ there was a hierarchy of power, function, and class within the corporation. Each individual held a specific job: managers would oversee and organize workers, salesmen would sell the product, engineers would design the product, and so forth. In the new corporate structure however, job lines have been blurred and all workers form a larger team in which individuals are on a similar power-plane, are multi-specialized, and are more flexible.⁶ The workforce forms more of a cloud in which each worker moves and shifts, orbiting around one another in a form of anti-structure. This is a particular example of the more universal phenomenon that is occurring within the Network. Countries are ruled by leaders or presidents, vice presidents, cabinets, parliaments, and so forth or, on a larger scale, particular countries hold power over lesser countries. However, within a networked environment hierarchical power structures, or the few ruling the many, are converted into a structure more akin to a pure or direct democracy, or the many ruling themselves directly as a crowd and interacting as non-individual, non-specialized peers.

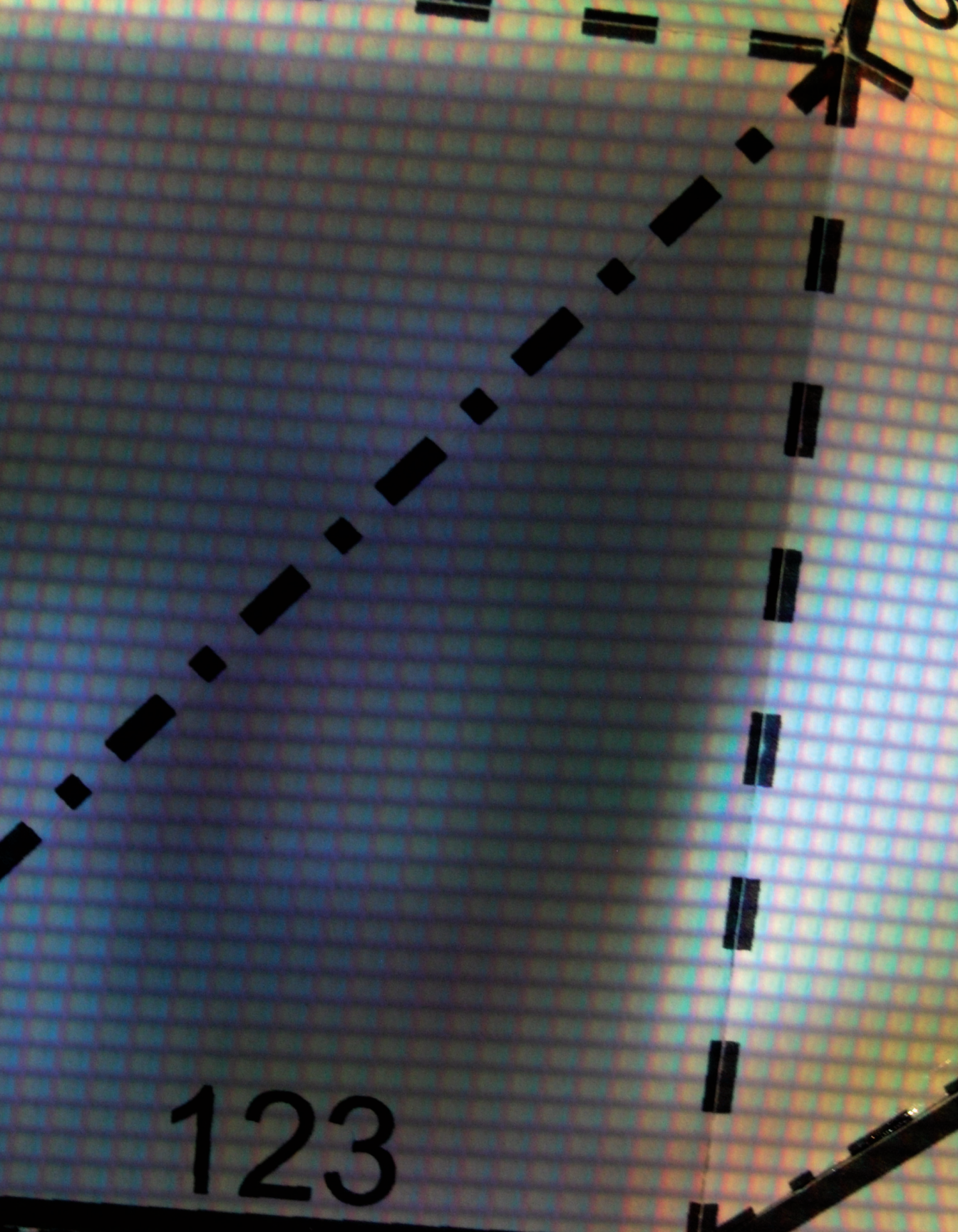
The entire concept is encapsulated neatly with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's postmodern concept of radical horizontality, or the rhizome. The concept of a rhizome is taken from biology, and signifies a structure fundamentally opposed to that of a tree. A tree-like structure is centralized, hierarchical, and linearly connected. A rhizomatic structure is decentralized and simultaneous with no set entrance or exit and not forming a uniform whole.⁷

The rhizomatic structure of the Network has a number of implications and effects, two of which are the formation of diverse microcultures, or **tribes**, and the easier access to means of perpetrating cultural imperialism.

In reality, the flattening of hierarchical structures in society does not expand to become an all-encompassing anarchy as is described in parts of McLuhan and Baudrillard's writing. The progression stops at the reduction of hierarchical structures to a much smaller scale, called tribes, as predicted by McLuhan in 1989 and observed by **Seth Godin** in 2007. McLuhan states: "...the age of acoustic space in politics will surface with a vengeance. Centers everywhere and margins nowhere in a new tribalism,"⁸ then expands on this describing the formation of "...ethnic barrios organizing themselves into self-sufficient, electronically coordinated enclosures..." McLuhan presents the idea of the reversal of culture to a tribal model on which many native cultures are based, yet using electronic networking technology as their means of tribal gathering. While the tribes of the past rallied around a life-giving fire and an oral tradition, electronic tribes

Tribes:

In *The Global Village*, McLuhan describes further the reasons for his use of the word tribe—specifically, how electronic networks mimic native cultures such as the Inuit and Asian cultures rely on group consciousness in relying on using the right brain more heavily. In the Network, this phenomenon manifests in visual motifs as well as informational and process trends. In recent years, on design and art aggregation websites I have noticed an increase in the appearance of nature images combined with cold and unnatural geometric shapes and colors. Deer, bears, birds, natural landscapes, and images of people appearing to represent native cultures, or cultures commonly associated with being more in tune with nature. Is it possible the Network's return to a simultaneous, synchronic mode of thought has activated memories of, or desires for a deeper connection to the natural world?



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Gravity Sigil (close up of eye)

I view my identity from afar and it appears uniform, composed of larger pieces of information and the connections between them. I examine it closer and it becomes clear to me all is constructed of discrete, one-by-one, luminescent points of data. I find these bright points in the darkness and slowly piece them together, each piece forming groups, each group collecting into groups still larger until I rebuild the uniformity I originally saw. My identity is collapsed to form a tight, microscopic grid, its linearity lost as the singular becomes the simultaneous.

coalesce around bright, tightly packed centers of data that connect and satisfy a craving for further self-definition.⁹

McLuhan's predictions once again proved to be fairly accurate, although they manifested in the form of trends and not the universality McLuhan's use of "everywhere" and "nowhere" would suggest. Seth Godin largely observes this, but extends McLuhan's ideas to modern cultural developments. Godin describes that many people have begun forming into small, electronically coordinated tribes based around common interests or ideas for how society can be improved. Within the Network there are forums for bird owners, meetings for donut lovers, videos for model builders, and so forth.¹⁰ Ease of access to technology and information has created a democratization of leadership and a shift to a bottom-up model of idea formation. Any person can identify a gap in society and become a leader of a tribe attempting to fill that gap.¹¹

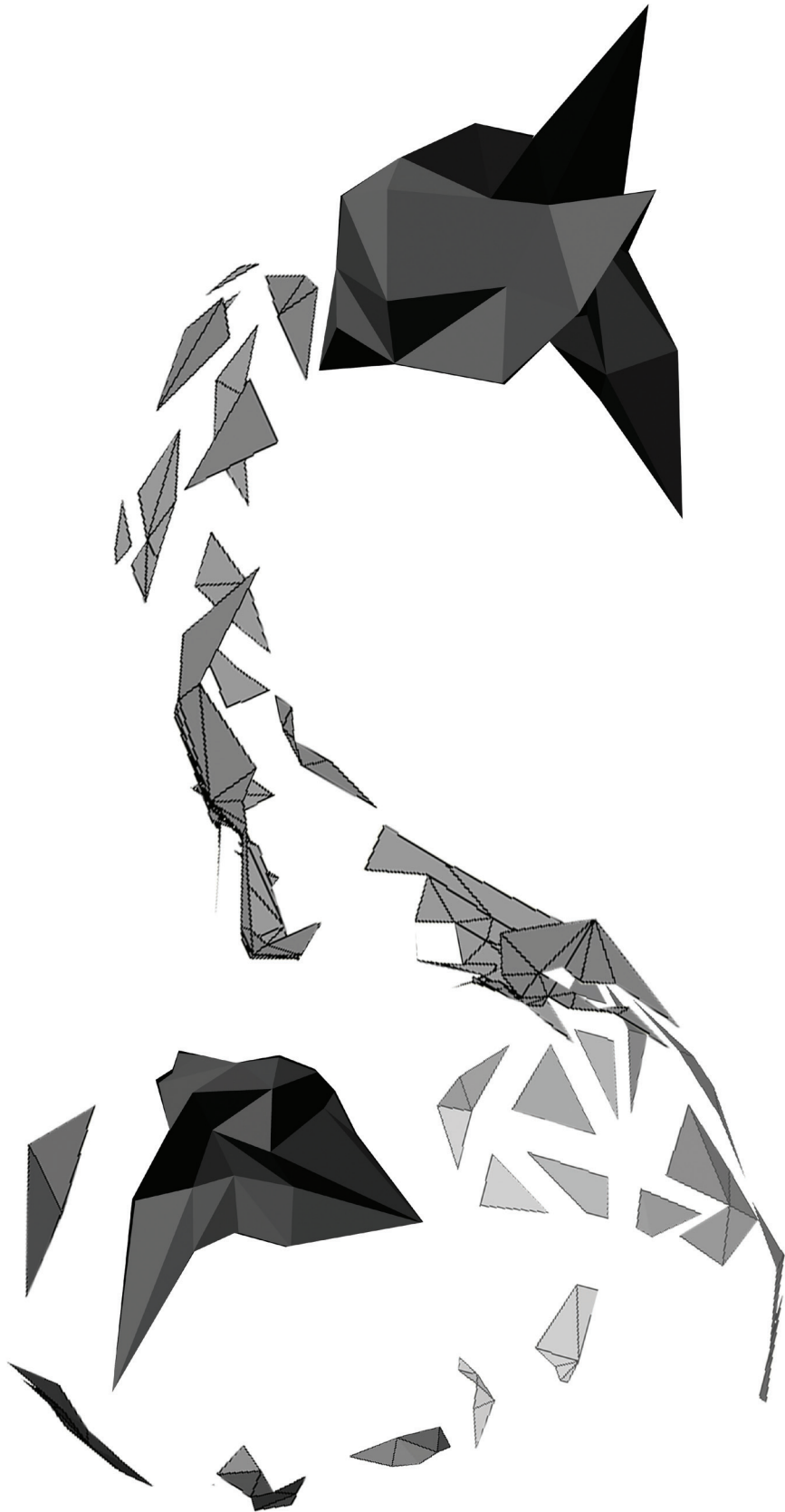
Networked environments also have a potential negative side: the enabling of cultural imperialism. In reality, networked environments do not become a universal monoculture, and certain users and certain ideas gain popularity over others. Consider, however, if these imbalances of power were present at a fundamental level. If the very structure of the Network were biased toward one culture or one set of ideas, each user would undergo a forced reprogramming, consciously or unconsciously, to simulate themselves in a way agreeable to the Network's bias. Users would be as living dolls, each with their own personality, but at their core stuffed with the same material. Liu's monoculture of diversity is an example of

this because it also carries with it, by his own definition, the connotation of erasure and simulation of culture by corporations. Corporations have decentralized and become much more global in scope as a result of network technologies. However, corporate culture and methods are, at their root, structured in Anglo-American standards and modes of thought. Therefore, by engaging with these corporations people of foreign nations will be assimilated into the American way of life. As Liu states, “Mainstream American culture...gets to be both a distinct cultural identity...and something universal.”

At a glance it seems that corporations are the core antagonist of the free, open Network, the only limit check on the constant flow of knowledge, and the bane of the **hacker**. Hackers and their mentality are the pure and clandestine children of the scientific method. As any child of science would, the hacker questions and probes, explores and dismantles in a continual search for the source and function of devices—but strictly as a hobby, and never for money. Because of this amateur status, they believe information should follow this model as well, and the hacker often travels up to and past the bounding line of the law into the wilderness beyond in pursuit of information. Yet is unchecked access to all available knowledge and understanding a necessary or socially responsible goal? If knowledge is power, then a radical increase in knowledge availability translates to a radical flattening of power structure, and therefore completely undermines the organizational structure on which our society is founded.¹²

• **Hacker:**

The concept of a hacker entered into the world through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1960s. Originally, the term did not refer to computers at all, but to students who did not attend class and, instead, slept in all day and pursued his or her hobbies at night. Computer hackers, therefore, are people who are experts at computers, but only as a hobby—a hacker cannot be a professional and hacking for money. Essentially, hackers have brought the act of subversive activity to an art. Whether it's cracking the security on a program or performing a practical joke, hackers must do it completely and take aesthetics into account.¹²



Freespace (digital version)

As soon as my mind is transferred to digitality, I see the world rapidly spread apart as a loose stack of photos tossed onto a table. I immediately notice patterns, how the pieces relate and interact, how colors blend, how people move toward and away from one another. In the vast and wild display these patterns form into stars, constellations, galaxies, planetary systems all floating around one another, accelerating with each other's gravity then being flung off with a trail of particles left behind.

Network and Access: Collective Identity

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5. HETEROSAPIENS: IDENTITY AS MASH - UP



*My Extruded Finger, My Scintillating Mind, My Fertile
Forehead*

As I consider myself, the action of my thought separates my identity into distinct parts. My fingers, my mind, my forehead, each piece an microcosm containing who I am. And these pieces grow stronger, more distinct until all else ceases to matter. Were these disembodied, sectioned parts of my body all that ever were? I attempt to reconnect them but the space between is difficult to reconcile.

Heterosapiens: Identity as Mash-up

“Today’s self emerges from the network, not so much a whole individual as a composite entity constituted out of the links it forms with others, a mix of known and unknown others it links to via the Net.”¹

-Kazys Varnelis

Our conception of identity changes

as networked culture continues to take the fore. While Modernism defined a person’s identity by time, place, personal history, immediate community and a strong belief in the power of the individual, networked culture is an extension of postmodernism, and defines identity by the large array of connections that are forged by a person’s interaction with the Network and other users.

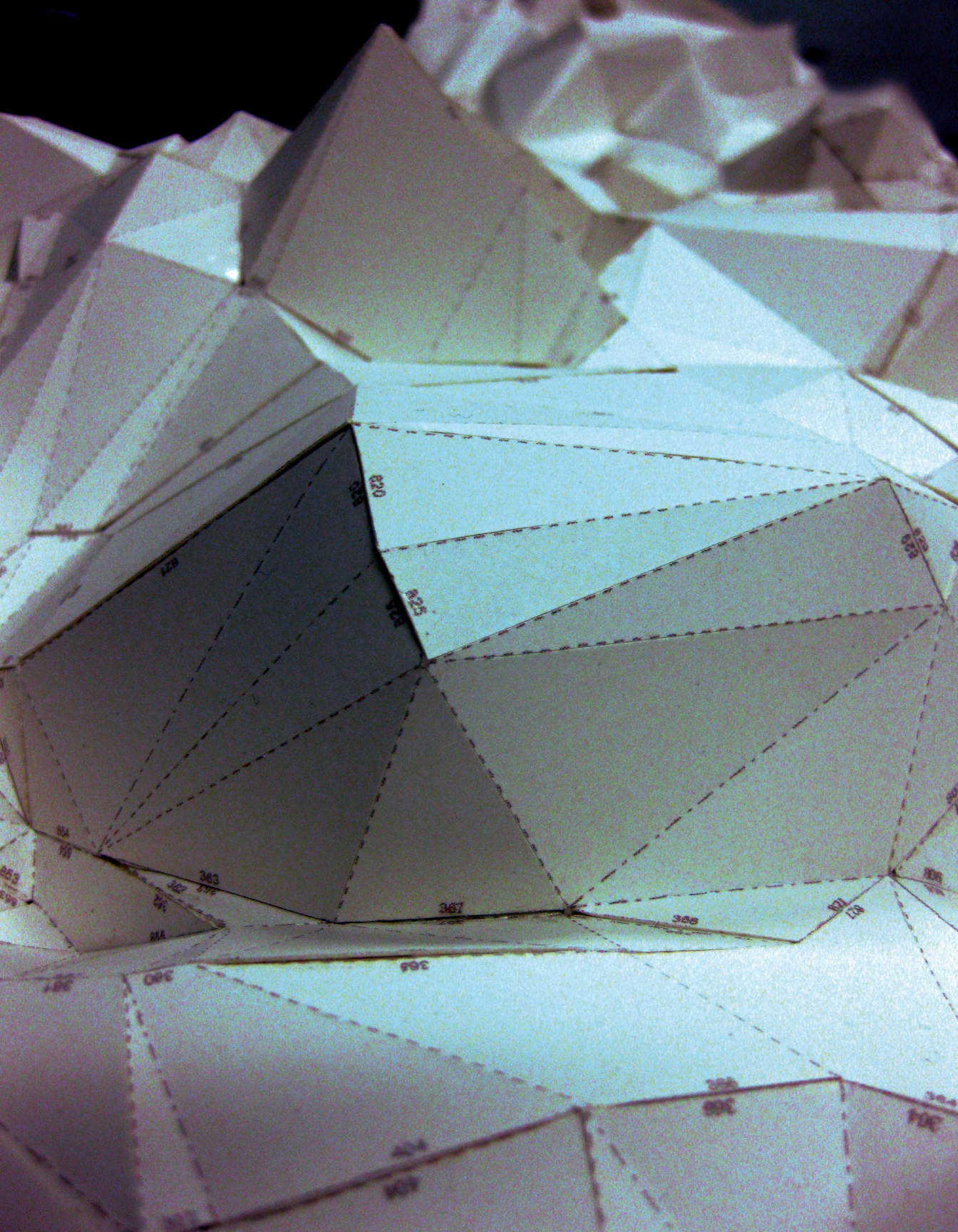
The concept of a mashup is used in a wide variety of areas, but found primarily in music and web programming. A mashup refers to a hybrid of structural elements taken from one or more separate places. In music, a mashup might consist of the drum line from one song and the vocals from another, creating a hybrid of the two. In web programming a mashup might combine a Google map with data about restaurants in your neighborhood to form an application with new uses.² Mashups are similar to remixes, but while remixes take short quotes from other sources and combine them with original material, mashups are composed entirely of quoted material.

The quoted material used for the purposes of a personal, networked identity mashup vary from his or her “likes” of various media or web-pages on Facebook, published content, and meta data, such as comments, he or

she outputs and receives. The identity of a user ensconced in the Network is essentially an aggregate undergoing perpetual mutation. A link to a Youtube video or a passing comment, each rapid and ephemeral gestures of the user, often replace the solid moral stance or religious affiliation that might define a person of the past. This new method of identity construction is largely unrestricted by a sense of responsibility, a need for consistency, or an inherent moral solidarity. Network identity is in continual in flux or constant beta—a shifting topography on micro and macro scale, mimicking geology but in a fraction of the time.³

In addition, as a networked human spreads ones consciousness into the Network and appropriates, reimagines, and internalizes the things he or she finds there, the Network does the same in return. The media and information making up the user's personal identity is, upon upload, freely manipulated at the whim of the Network and its constituents. Network technology itself is capable of rapidly disseminating, indexing, posting, and tagging content with or without a user's knowledge. An example of this is Facebook's "like" function that can be attached to any web page, even those entirely separate from Facebook. The "like" function displays universally accessible information on the webpage where it is present about who has liked the page and what they have to say about it. Therefore any user who has liked that page is linked to it and in this way the Network automatically and dynamically aids in creating his or her aggregated identities.

Aggregate or mashup identity is also a quality present in Postmodernism, but not to the extent that it



Grain Shift (view along surface)

The surface of my digitized mind is like a shifting topography, a flowing geological structure composed of pyramids, angled valleys and jutting spurs, simultaneously monumental and miniscule. If I were to attempt to traverse it on foot it would be impossible and nonsensical—slick, unforgiving and labyrinthine, devoid of landmarks or destinations; it parts with navigation and location entirely. Yet this is my home; I had forgotten I am lost.

is in networked culture. Postmodernism actively refuted Modernism's "...unshakeable belief in the uniqueness of individuals"⁴ and emphasis on originality and genius. In this way an identity formed from collected and connected quotations of other identities would be right in line with Postmodern thinking. However, networked culture has been extended and removed from all reference to the qualities of Modernism because it no longer attempts to oppose it; Modernism is simply disregarded altogether. As a result, If Postmodernism refuted Modernism by saying nothing is original, then networked culture takes this lack of originality for granted. The manifestation of networked, mashup identity confirms this.⁵

McLuhan predicted and described the formation of mashups or data sets to define the self with the idea of pattern recognition:

"When pushed to its limits, the product of the computer reverses into simultaneous pattern recognition (acoustic space), eroding or bypassing mechanical processes in all sequential operations...Any business corporation requiring the use of computers for communication and record-keeping will have no other alternative but to decentralize. When applied to new forms of electronic-messaging...it quickly converts sequential alphanumeric texts into multi-level signs and aphorisms, encouraging ideographic summation, like hieroglyphics."⁶

Computer technology consists, at its basis, of the rapid, linear processing of binary information. Computers are programmed to only understand the most linear, low

Hieroglyphics:

McLuhan's use of the word hieroglyphics is a striking example of his capacity for prediction. This description of the way in which electronic messaging will transform struck me as being very accurate and descriptive of the ways in which microblogs function. For example, Twitter's "hashtags" are strings of text that users can place in their posts, automatically entering it into a string of posts relating to a grander, more widespread topic permeating the social network. The definition of the term aside, the visual nature of a hashtag relates to McLuhan's description of "ideographic summation" and "hieroglyphs": an example of a hashtag might be #applesaregoodforyou or #marshallmcluhan. Are these strings of symbols truly members of the English language, or members of a complex ideographic system native to the Twitter environment?

level information: yes and no. However, they process this information at incredible speeds and never become bored of it, which in turn frees the user from the monotony of the computer's tasks and allows them to use its speed to move large quantities of information. Therefore, when extended to this speed, the linear processes of computers reverse and appear to humans as simultaneous processes that require observation of changing patterns to understand. Networked humans resort to gathering disparate pieces of information into groups or patterns in order to make sense of themselves. We are adrift in a sea of stimuli, latching on to bright points of data to understand our surroundings, just as ancient man found his way by forming constellations from the tangle of stars.⁷

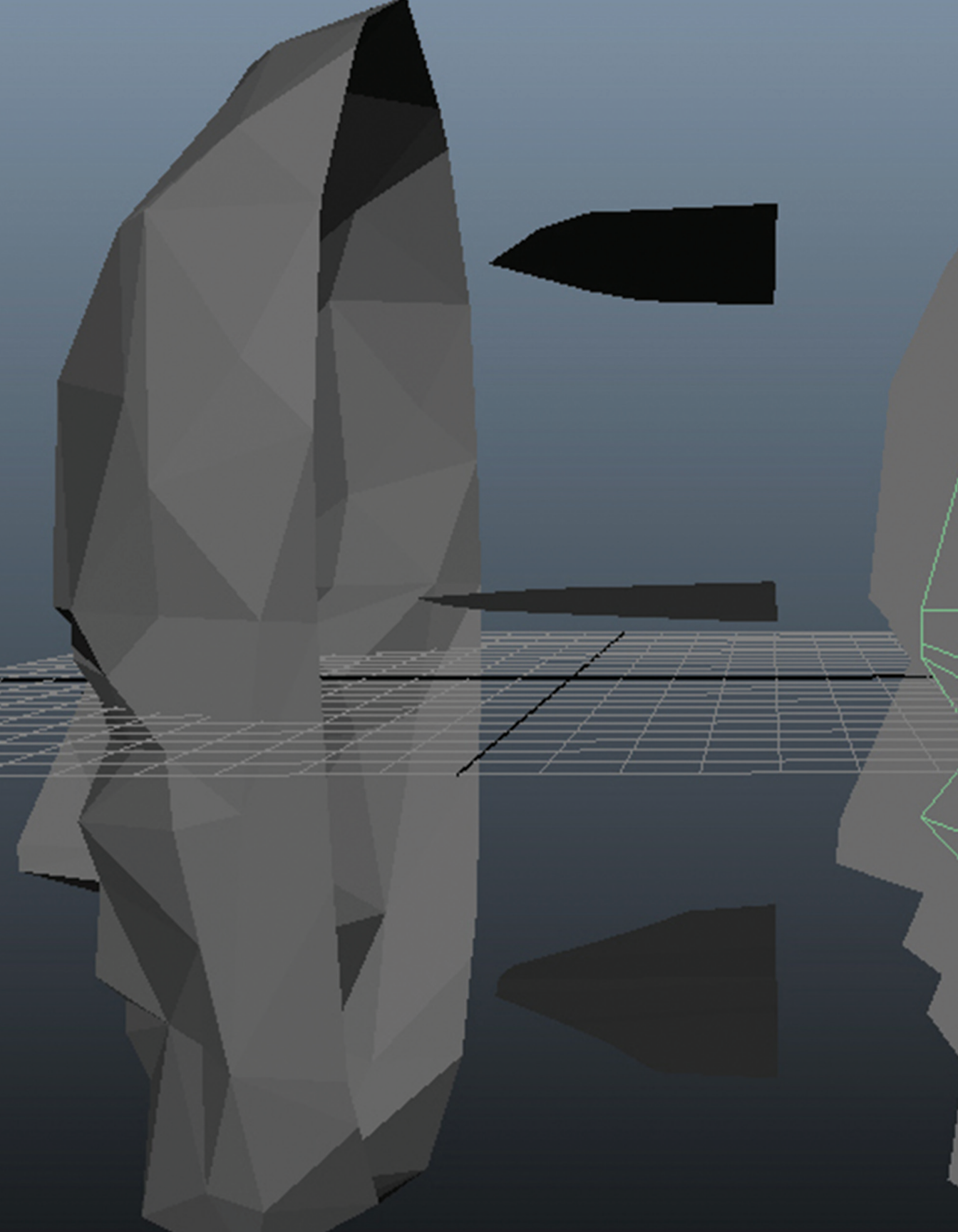
Efficient Cause:

In Aristotelean philosophy there were four "causes" used to describe how things came about. However, the other causes were largely abandoned for efficient cause, which relates only to the technical reasons, or the linear cause and effect relationship, between a particular object or event and its outcomes. For example, the efficient cause of a statue would be the art of stone carving.¹¹

In a broader sense, McLuhan is stating that this tangle of stars or pattern recognition may be a more effective method of analyzing technology than the singularly focused mode we have used in previous generations. In the past we have used the mode of **efficient cause**, which focuses only on the direct cause and effect relationship between an event, or technology, and its outcomes. This method isolates **figure** from **ground**, or subject from object. Instead of this isolationist approach, McLuhan proposes that the analysis of a technology is ineffective unless it is seen as a central collecting pool the contextual information surrounding it.⁸ In painting or art history, if a portrait is painted without knowledge of the whole environment, both figure and ground, what impact could the portrait have? The figure floats and appears to have little effect on anything surrounding it, both

Figure and Ground:

Figure and Ground are concepts of Gestalt psychology, adapted by Danish art critic Edgar Rubin to illustrate the functionality of visual perception. McLuhan uses these terms, in this instance, to delineate an isolated technology (figure) and its larger context (ground).¹²



*Screenshot of face model used in Gravity Sigil, in Maya
(Program used for 3D modeling)*

I inhabit a timeless, distance-less, location-less space. Objects float statically within it, suspended in an unknown medium, covered in a uniform gray, dull and dim. This is the world of vertices and vectors—myself and all things composed of the same basic elements, the same basic structures, the same angular and unforgiving polygons.

physically and mentally, for all that surrounds it is blocked out. McLuhan states the problem that “...technologies, like words, are metaphors. They similarly involve the transformation of the user insofar as they establish new relationships between him and his environments” Using McLuhan’s more holistic mode of capturing patterns of history and context highlights what McLuhan calls the “resonating interval”, or the dynamism created by the interplay of subject and object, or figure and ground. This analysis allows for more accurate predictions as to what the effects of any given technology might be, and what might come after it.

Perhaps in the same way interesting and valuable predictions emerge from McLuhan’s complex contextual patterns, networked humans could eventually find their way if their personal networks become sufficiently complex. In the philosophy of complexity, or complexity theory, systems are described in which the individual parts hold less importance than the connections between them—a description mirroring the networked mode of identity construction. In these complex systems, the parts are non-linearly, heterogeneous, and utilize feedback loops or “resonating intervals”. Because of these qualities (the use of feedback loops in particular) complex systems are self-organizing and exhibit qualities of emergence—emergence being the idea summed up by the phrase “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”.⁹ In other words, the pieces of data forming our data bodies, if they become sufficiently complex, may begin to exhibit qualities that none of the parts possess on their own. In

Vertex and Vector:

Vectors and vertices play a large role in the process and visual form of my artwork in addition to my conceptual focus. The term vertex describes a static point, often at which two or more lines, or vectors, converge. The term vector finds application in many different areas from epidemiology to computing to entertainment. However, a few concepts are common across all of its uses: vectors are objects, or vertices, that contain a quality of movement, translation, or connection. In virtual 3D modelling environments, which I use frequently in my artwork, objects are literally constructed of mathematical vertices and vectors connected to form polygons. These vertices and vectors are also the building blocks of networks in both digital and real space.

the resonating space between shining points of data that make up our networked bodies, higher level functioning or consciousness may appear on the order of that which has become fundamental to and characteristic of our physical identities.¹⁰

Each networked individual has his or her own aggregate of data that is rooted in the life of a physical, real world human. However, pieces of these aggregates in turn form meta-aggregates, or sites that aggregate user information and therefore have no real world representation. It is for these data bodies that the theories of complexity might apply. Already aggregation services exhibit spontaneous trends—identities of their own. Will they eventually add up to more than the sum of their individual data parts? And at the same time, what implications does this have for humans as individuals? Just as a **vertex** where many **vectors** meet, so to a unit of information, when exposed to the Network, becomes both a positive quality of the self and of the other; the two merge for a brief moment before moving on. The self is repeated in tiny microcosms of information, within which the other is repeated as well. Even if consciousness forms within the Network to whom does this consciousness belong? Where is the separation between self and other?

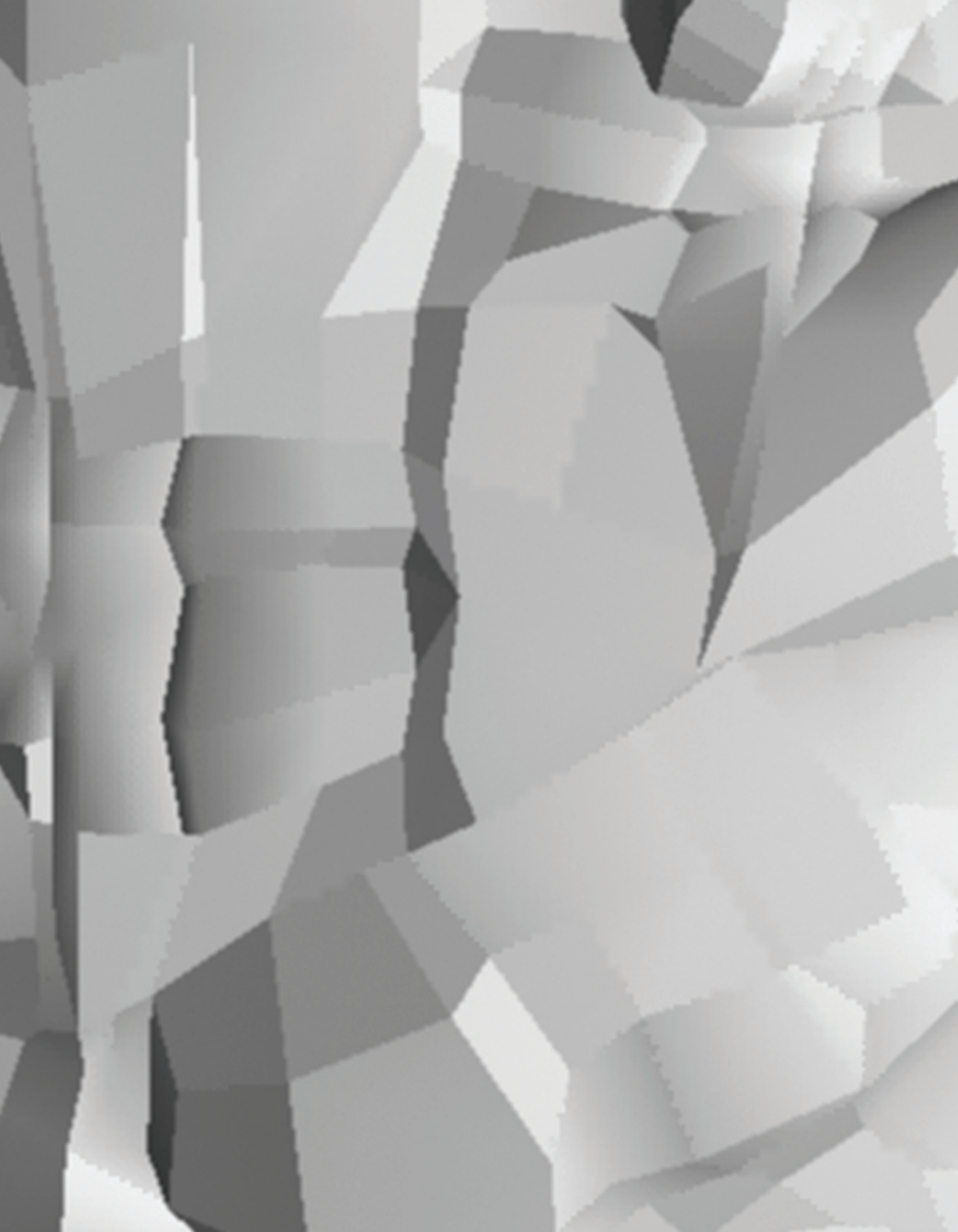


Grain Shift (left side detail)

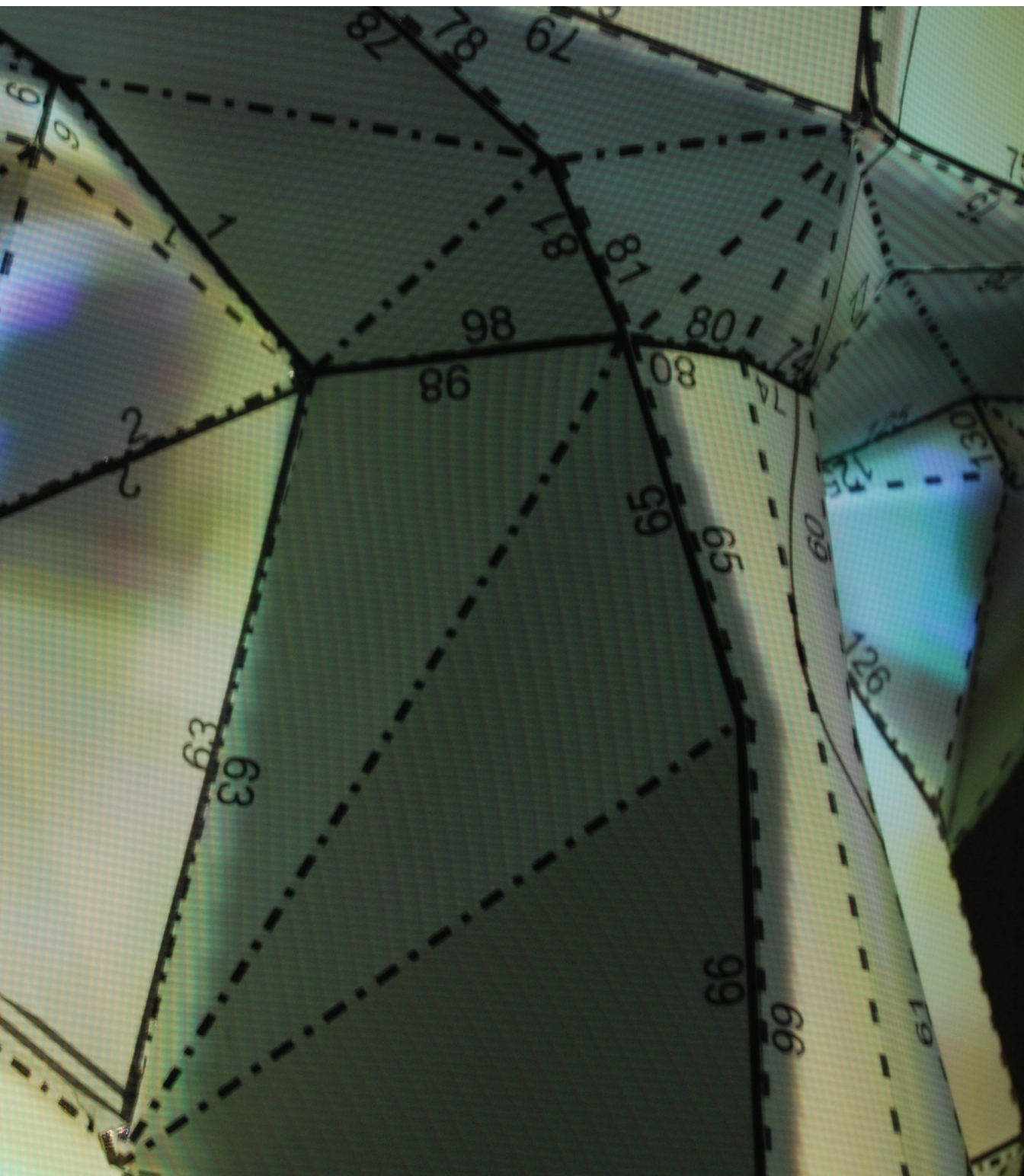
*I flow and shift, all vectors now, all lines, all mindless data.
I run parallel, I run in converging paths, I form into a road
directing and moving pure information, gathering in speed
and quantity...until all my vectors converge with one another
and crash upward. My surface shifts rapidly and radically, my
previous flow continuing its momentum and ejecting towering
forms into the sky like mountains forming from tectonic plates.
And I see the sky from their heights. What once was mindless
and saw no pattern now brings about something new, complex,
and beautiful built from its cold and crowded pieces.*

Notes

1. Varnelis
2. Helft
3. Varnelis
4. Barrett 167
5. Varnelis
6. McLuhan 103
7. McLuhan 9
8. McLuhan 8
9. Chris Lucas, “The Spirit of Complexity”, *calresco.org*, CALResCo (Complexity & Artificial Life Research), 1999, web, April 2011.
10. Chris Lucas and Yuri Milov, “Conflicts as Emergent Phenomena of Complexity”, *calresco.org*, CALResCo, 1997, web, April 2011.
11. McLuhan 8
12. McLuhan 8



6. LIFECAST: IDENTITY IN CONSTANT PERFORMANCE



Gravity Sigil (close up of eyes and nose)

I align my eyes with those of the network and peer outward. At first I am confronted with blackness, uniform and deep but in moments a light appears, and within it a blurry figure. I move and perform for them, connecting with my eyes, connecting with the form of my face meshing, pressing up against the digital glass. The figures, these viewers gaze, connect and become me.

Lifecast: Identity in Constant Performance

As conceived and expounded upon

by Erving Goffman in 1950, identity can be seen as a performance one acts out on the stage of social life.¹ This performance is not normally constant because it is not necessary, and perhaps even impossible, to perform for oneself. However, when interacting with the Network even the moments one has alone begin to seem invaded upon, and the line between public and private becomes blurred.² In addition, performance necessarily involves the surrender of some individual control because of the watching audience. In the Network this control becomes much more immediate and tangible.

Social networking platforms illustrate the blurring of public and private. For example, there are hundreds of millions of users on Facebook, meaning the website is always actively populated. However, users do not perceive this activity as one would perceive a room full of people. Activity of users, although conveyed in nearly real time, is only transmitted in short bursts. Bits and fragments in the form of posts, notifications, or instant messages are released individually instead of in a continuous and homogeneous flow of information as one would experience in reality. In addition, users can interact with other users' profiles without them knowing. Therefore there is a sense that someone is always watching, and yet not one is perceivably present. Some find this frightening and some revel in the attention, but all perform constantly for an invisible audience.

As a result of the necessity to convey meaning to this audience identity performance can be seen as a series

of representational actions, and in this way relates to semiotics. Therefore, Baudrillard's three historical stages of semiotics, or "orders of appearance", as written in his work *Simulations* can be used to show how social performance reached the state it has in networked culture. The stages Baudrillard sets forth are counterfeit, production, and simulation. In essence, each of these orders represents a further departure of signs from a direct representational relationship with reality.³

The era of counterfeit corresponded with humans no longer being limited to the signs they are able to use; symbols are dispersed to all who desire them. This era was governed by a careful and attentive reproduction of the qualities of the original.⁴ In the order of production the concept of an original was not accessed at all. The era of production focused on the manufacture of exact copies among which no original was distinguishable, reducing identity to a number in a series.⁵ In the third order, that of simulation, what Baudrillard calls the "code" is at the basis of the sign system. In this era, the entire system of signs stems from this code that, as in computer code or DNA, is a plan or set of instructions. Because of this foundation in an immutable code, all things are predetermined; it is as if everything has already happened, negating the progression of time. The system "...puts an end to its myth of beginning, its internal contradictions...and it puts an end also to the myth of its own end..." In the era of simulation, all signs are **internally referential** to the point of infinity.⁶

Thus, Baudrillard's orders show the movement from a person mimicking directly, or counterfeiting, the

Self-Reference:

I find that self-reference, or internal reference is a particularly vital notion to the concept of identity in the broadest sense. The very notion of humanity as a distinct species of higher cognition relies on self-awareness, or consciousness. Self-awareness and consciousness are the qualities of being able to look upon oneself as one looks upon another and understand oneself as a separate entity from others. Therefore identity, whether viewed as a person in ancient Egypt, the medieval era, modernism, or networked culture relies in some way on this self-referential ability. The difference in the Network lies in the fracturing, radical in extent and monumental in scope, of this life-affirming mirror. It is the contradictory notion of a vast diversity contained within a singular, static unity.



"Grain Shift" (right side detail)

My digital identity connects and mingles with the identities of others. We multifarious beings connect, exchange, and finally merge into a hybrid being; "I" becomes "we" in the Network. We push and bend at our borders, expanding and contracting organically, absorbing more and more until we seem to encompass all things. Our being is predetermined, containing all time in a single locality.

manner of speech, clothing, or general air of another person to a fast paced performance simulating itself. Before the era of simulation, or Postmodernism, a person would act out their identity in a continuous and slowly changing stream for those people physically surrounding them. However, in Postmodern culture and its mutated progeny, the Network, users are surrounded by a vast and diverse spectral audience leading to rapid and disjointed shifts in role, and each role is an appropriated version of the role of another. Spurred on by the development of technology, individual identity has become removed from a sense of truth, objectivity, or context.

Twitter and Facebook in particular lend themselves to this constant performance. Many users continuously post content regarding their everyday activities. Anything from eating at a particularly good restaurant, walking past a beautiful view, or having a day with their family can constitute an opportune moment to post. Because these posts are used for updating ones friends or fellow users, the act of posting becomes a distilling of the moment or event to a snippet of information calculated or appropriated from what others might want to see.⁷ Wittingly or unwittingly, by using these applications users begin to remove themselves from the ongoing flow of location, moment, and even their own personal experience in order preserve a piece of it.

The functions of Twitter, Facebook, and social networking applications like them can also be seen as cultural descendants of the reality television show. Beginning with the 1971 broadcast of the Louds, which was a show following a “perfect” family of five and their

everyday activities, the reality television form was born.⁸ This form expanded into numerous shows, and now has moved from television and infiltrated the consciousness and desires of the individual. Social networks and microblogs act as hyper specific and personalized stages for the users' own reality show. In the extreme, the user performs constantly, displaying everyday activities and removing any sense of narrative arc or underlying meaning.⁹

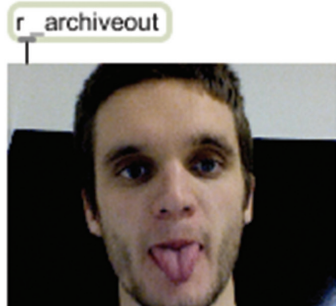
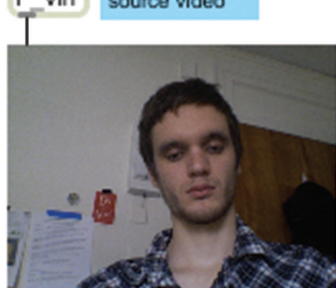
The show featuring the Loud family also illustrated how this display of the everyday, voluntarily or involuntarily, can easily become a dramatization of reality. The Loud family ended up falling apart and, arguably, this was the result of what must have seemed a perpetually present audience. They unknowingly began to act out the drama the audience wished to see. In the same way the actions of the Loud family were dictated by the television, the user's identity now becomes governed by the Network. A user's information once released into the Network, is at the mercy of the Network and those within it. Both other users of the Network and the Network itself function to reorganize, juxtapose, and distribute data and, because of this, the life of any user is susceptible to changing from one of action to one of dramatic reenactment.¹⁰

In a sense, when one enters the position of the Louds or a user in the Network, McLuhan's resonating interval is created because one is intimately aware of watching oneself and being watched simultaneously. Baudrillard describes the situation as "You no longer watch TV, TV watches you (live),'...switching over from the **panoptic** apparatus of surveillance...to a system of

Panopticon:

The Panopticon, meaning "all seeing", is an idea for a prison developed by British jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1787. The Panopticon is fairly tall and shaped like a half circle. Prison guards circle around the edges and prisoners remain in the center. The building is constructed such that the guards are able to conduct surveillance on the prisoners without the prisoners knowing who or when anyone is watching them. The idea is that the mental uncertainty created by this would be vital for discipline of the prisoners.

16

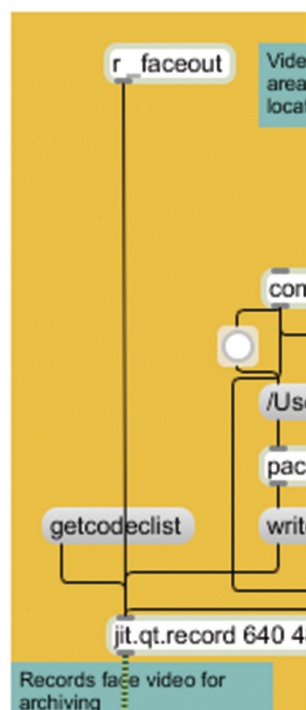
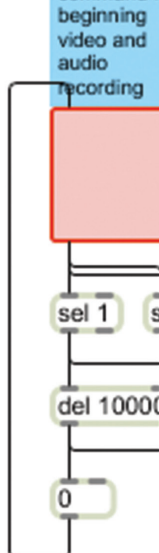
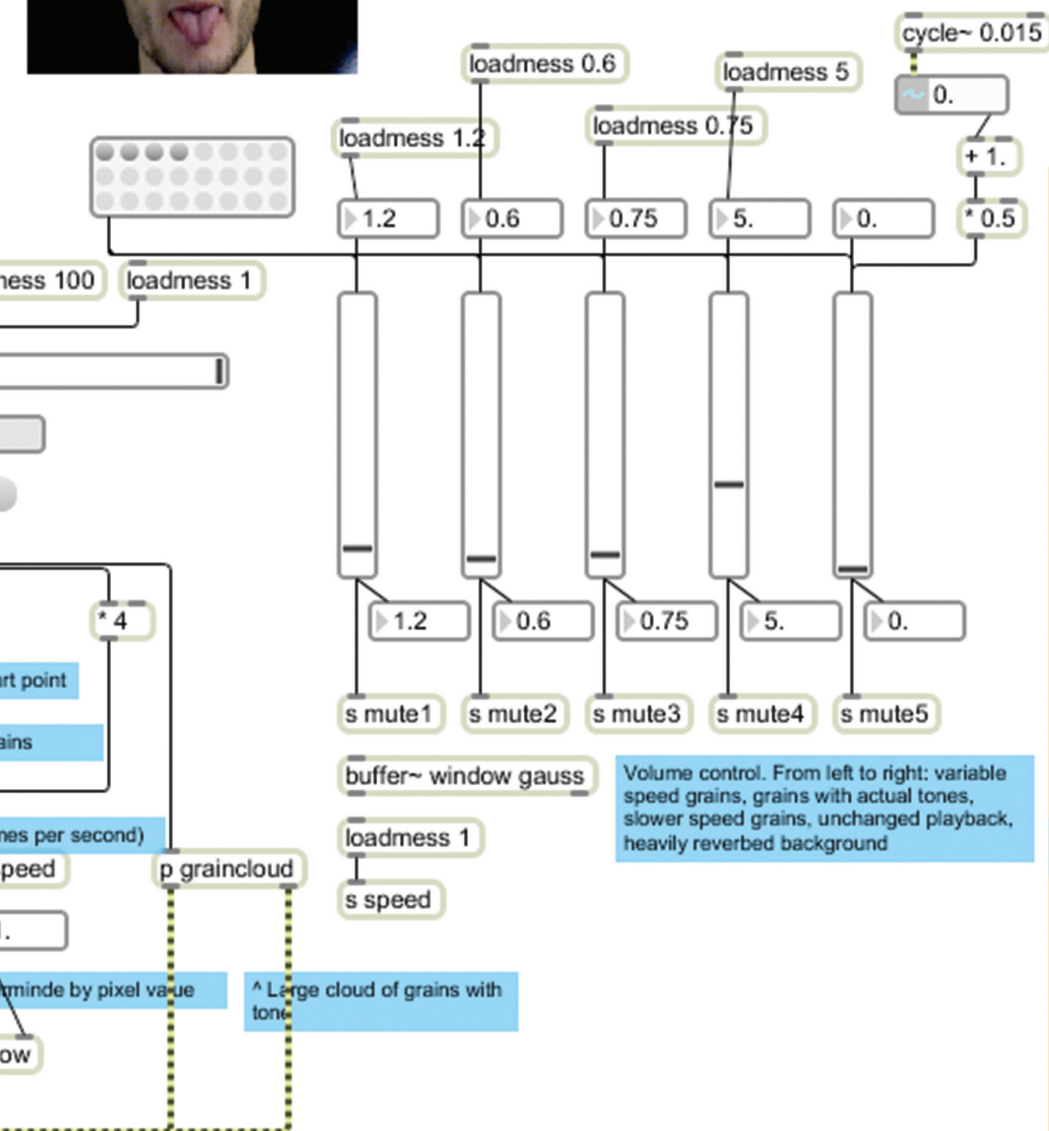


^ Shows box around face (as computed by cv.jit.faces)

^ Shows ONLY are of window in which face is located

< Video currently being projected on face

Volume values sent upon loading up the patch



Screenshot from MAX/MSP Jitter patch used in Gravity Sigil

My identity functions as a computer program, bits and pieces strung together with wires and functions, cobbled together from micro identities like a patchwork. Each button, each line of text, each image serves its purpose; informing, directing, referencing, processing. The parts are miniscule and mostly singular in function. I painstakingly locate and remove them from their resting places, stringing them together delicately like a web. Yet despite it's apparent complexity it seems to function so simply. What piece am I missing?

Mechanical Reproduction:

Walter Benjamin was a German philosopher and literary critic working in the years before World War II. His essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, describing the changes that came about in the art world with film and photography, was arguably his most influential. Among other points, Benjamin asserts that artwork loses much of its context—its location of origin, the hard work of the artist, its place in the art historical canon—when mechanically reproduced. Context is required for authenticity, and authenticity is required for the artwork to retain its original “aura” or feeling. Benjamin also states that performance changes in film because it done for a camera rather than an audience. A live audience must see what the actor shows them and respect the performance’s integrity. When a camera enters as the medium between audience and actor, however, the audience can only identify with the camera and thereby takes on its mechanical and critical role. From these points it is clear how McLuhan and Baudrillard, among others, drew influence from Benjamin for much of their writing.

deterrence, where the distinction between active and passive is abolished...‘YOU are the model!’ ‘YOU are the majority!’”¹¹ The blurring of the line between audience and performer, public and private is a fundamental property of mediated communication, for the medium captures the performer in some way.

The constant, networked performances of users also give little regard to history and context in the process of appropriation. Alan Liu discusses this in *The Laws of Cool*, stating that when society was in the throes of **mechanical reproduction**, a phenomenon called *camo-tech* was adopted by subcultures. *Camo-tech*, in short, was the co-opting of technological rationality to the creation of style. Particular styles or scenes were perfected and duplicated in a manner “...like working in a machine shop, only without the shop.”¹² These subcultural archetypes then entered into the mainstream, but in a soulless and decontextualized way:

“...the middle class identified primarily with the empty position rather than identity of the outsider. It identified less with the actor or even the action of the outsider’s challenge to the system, in other words, than with the empty stage or site of the exotic on which that challenge was enacted...to put it in a way that has everything to do with the mythopoetic landscapes of work leading from filmic deserts to screensaver-like digital highways and seas: the mainstream identified with the pure milieu, ambience, or texture of challenge, with style emptied of agents and agency to become a world sufficient unto itself.”¹³

This phenomenon manifests in networked culture in an intensified form: trends and styles proliferate rapidly and constantly and their source is lost with similar speed. In fact, in many cases the source is irrelevant or disregarded to begin with; media is introduced as original and, for the most part, users consuming this media don't attempt to check its authenticity.

Although the occupation of the “empty position” of subcultures as well as the removal of the self from the moment and personal experience has become common, it may not fulfill its dismal implications of a soulless, mass anti-culture due to a number of factors. The intensification of context-less occupation of archetypes in networked society can be seen as having actually provided easier access and increased variety of the available roles a person can play in their social performance, empowering the individual. In addition, networked identity can be seen as maintaining historical context or reference to “reality”. However, instead of the linear connectedness with which pre-Network identities were formed, networked identity uses synchronic and simultaneous connections in which historical information is not as necessary

A manifestation of these nonlinear connections can be found in the “**meme**”, a term coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins meaning a small unit of social information transferred from mind to mind in the manner of a genes.¹⁴ Memes can range from images of a particular type to a song, but are rapidly passed or remixed from person to person. Pre-Internet forms such as jingles from commercials could arguably be called memes as well, but

Meme:

An interesting case in the realm of memes is the “random” board, also called “/b”, of 4chan.org. This is a point of interest because 4chan.org is a forum in which users remain entirely anonymous and the content is unmoderated, meaning there is no restriction in subject matter. In addition, the forum is exactly the opposite of Google in that it has little memory; forum posts are archived for minutes to hours rather than in perpetuity. This anonymity and ephemerality allows full control and creative use of information on the Internet without moral obligation, spurring the board to be called a “meme factory”. Very little is new on 4chan; Images and text are repeated, forming memes that build rapidly in absurdity and complexity until they become unrecognizable disarray, the pieces of which are then recycled for further memes. /b is essentially the result of the normal progression and development of culture when the rules of engagement are discarded, corners are cut, and the process is sped up. /b bridges the gap between the banal and the most culturally taboo—it is a manic circus for no audience, put on by the players to please only themselves.

these memes were not able to travel between minds as rapidly as memes in the Network. Memes—especially those found in the Network—can be seen as a radical speeding up of the transformational dialogue between archetypes and clichés or, as McLuhan states, “...by repetition and archetype can become a cliché again, or an individual man can become a crowd.”¹⁵

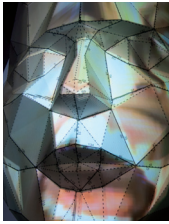
Theoretically, at some point the memes with which people identify themselves were generated with a direct, representational connection to historical and cultural information, but this connection or source is largely obscured by repetition, decentralization, and the variety of connections used. Once the branches of a tree have grown, the seed is mostly forgotten, yet remains in some form through every fiber of the tree. In the same way, if the Network and networked identity are entirely composed of these quanta of social information, whether users are aware of it or not, they must contain some remnant of history and representation. Perception of this departure from history and context is matter of deciding the questions: do originality and reality continue to exist if disregarded and, if not, how long until they are gone completely? Are originality and reality vital components to identity?

Notes

1. Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, (London: Doubleday, 1959)
2. Orenstein
3. Baurdillard 83
4. Baudrillard 84-5
5. Baudrillard 86-7
6. Baudrillard 112
7. Orenstein
8. Baudrillard 49
9. Varnelis
10. Baudrillard 51
11. Baudrillard 53
12. Liu 102-3
13. Liu 103
14. “Meme”, *wordnetweb.princeton.edu*, Princeton University, web, April 2011.
15. McLuhan 20
16. “Theory of Surveillance: The Panopticon”, *cartome.org*, 2001, web, April 2011.
17. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *marxists.org*, 2005, web, April 2011.

Exhibited and Peripheral Works

My artwork was made in conjunction with my literary research and was a significant component to my thought process.



Gravity Sigil (Exhibited): This piece is an interactive, multimedia installation involving sound and projected video. I created this piece using a process combining three programs: Maya, Pepakura Designer, and MAX/MSP Jitter. Maya is a 3D modelling

program, Pepakura Designer creates instructions for building a physical paper model based on the information contained in a 3D model, and MAX/MSP Jitter is a visual programming language primarily used for real-time manipulation of audio and video. In Maya I created a 3D model of a face based on the structure of my own face. I then imported this model into Pepakura Designer and used the resulting instructions to cut, fold, and glue paper to form the face I had originally designed in Maya. At the same time, I imported the 3D model from Maya into MAX/MSP Jitter. Using this program, I mapped video taken from gallery goers onto the 3D model as a texture. This video was then projected onto the paper face. I also used the pixel information from this captured video to manipulate background sound. In making this piece I kept in mind the idea of Postmodern schizophrenia and McLuhan's concept of the resonating interval. I envisioned the disembodiment of humans projecting themselves into the network, and searched for meaning in that oscillating, vibrating space between.



Grain Shift (Exhibited): Grain Shift is a model constructed of paper. This piece also uses the Maya and Pepakura Designer process, but the model I created in Maya for this piece was much more complex. I began with a 3D model of a face similar to the one

I used in Gravity Sigil, then attempted to transform and mutate it. The final form I decided to move forward with came about by accident; I duplicated the right portion of the piece, which contains many faces melding into one another, and attempted to move the duplicated portion. In doing so, parts of the piece moved at different rates than others, making parts of the form stretch and parts mash together. When I began this piece I had in mind an image of virtual topography with impossibly pointed peaks and valleys, created from the algorithmic processes connecting vectors to vertices.

Silica (Peripheral): This piece is a model constructed of



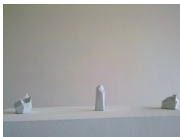
paper with images printed and drawn on its surface. It was made using the same process between Maya and Pepakura designer.

However, instead of using projection, I instead printed fragmented images of myself holding a study for this piece. I also added drawings to extend and transform the printed images. The combination of digital and tactile media was important to me in this piece. A significant concept in my thesis is the translation from physical to virtual, especially in the context of humans and their concept of self.



Freospace (Exhibited): Freespace is constructed from paper attached to a wall in both flat and three dimensional pieces. This piece was created using two methods: Maya and Pepakura Designer for the larger top and bottom portions, which protrude

form the wall, and a tracing of a projection for the smaller pieces in between, which lay flat on the wall. The top and bottom pieces are the front and back of a single 3D object, which is taken from my original 3D face model. My idea for this piece was a sort of map or Earth overlay. In my mind I saw the Network as an invisible layer of connections overlapping with the physical world. Each human has some hybrid version of his or herself residing within this virtual world.



My Extruded Finger, My Scintillating Mind, My Fertile Forehead

(Exhibited): Each of these pieces was printed using a Reprap Mendel 3D printer.

This printer works in a similar manner to an inkjet printer, but instead of releasing ink it releases heated plastic. This plastic is then built up layer by layer using instructions from a computer. The three pieces I built are models of small portions of the 3D face model I used for my other pieces. When making these pieces I was considering the way in which people convert their identities into distinct pieces. They begin to identify themselves by an outstanding physical feature or quality of their personality instead of being taken as a whole.

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