A SHORT HISTORY OF SELF-REPRESENTATION IN DIGITAL ART

TINA SAUERLAENDER

ABSTRACT | This article examines the lesser-known history of artistic self-representation in digital art, from the beginning of computer art to the present day. The genre has thematic as well as formal diversity: it is a product of artists working with electronic devices such as video synthesizers or digitizers, webcams, digital image and video editing tools, the internet, avatars, and social media platforms. Artistic self-representation in computer-based and digital art has been an underrepresented topic in art history and must be more closely studied in order to be integrated into the art historical canon. This article aims to give an overview of artistic self-representation in digital art from early computer art until today.

KEYWORDS | Digital art, contemporary art, contemporary visual culture, media art, portrait, social media content, self-representation.

Comprehensive, recent publications on artistic self-portraiture or artistic self-representation rarely cover computer-based or digital art. Sometimes, only a brief statement or short reference mentions it in passing or in the concluding chapter.[1] The narrative of digital art is told as a parallel thread in art history. Publications of digital art do include the body, but not artistic self-representation or self-portraiture as a special topic. Therefore, many of the questions of bodily presence in conjunction with self-presentation—an ongoing issue in both digital media and contemporary self-portraiture—are often ignored.[2] Only very recent publications address the topic of artistic self-representation in the digital age.[3] As there are mostly either books on self-portraiture (that do not include digital art) or on digital art (that do barely include self-representation), artistic self-representation is insufficiently covered creating a rift between the histories of traditional and digital art. Media art scholar and curator Christiane Paul states that there is a "continuing disconnect between digital art and the mainstream art world".[4] As reasons for this divide, she mentions the "process-oriented nature of the digital medium," as well as divergent "standards for presenting, collecting and preserving" in comparison to object-oriented media like painting or sculpture.[5] Art historian Thomas Dreher states that art status is only granted to certain media, but not for example to net art, because the Internet circumvents the traditional concept of the commercial art trade.[6] Artists could present their work or sell directly to their customers without being affiliated with a gallery. Since a certain number of exhibitions in public museums are co-financed by galleries (who often bear the production costs for the work), artists without galleries lack the financial support for institutional shows, which in turn leads to an underrepresentation in the historical canon. Another reason behind the parallel narratives is that art history traditionally focuses more on concluded artistic movements than on contemporary developments. Furthermore, we are only now beginning to acknowledge the profound significance of the Internet and the digital realm, which was long regarded as a phenomenon separate from real life, but not as an essential part of life itself. To gain awareness of the topic of artistic self-representation in digital art and trace its lineage and trajectory, it is vital to review its history from the beginning of computer art.

In its infancy, computer art was mainly concerned with the computational generation of abstract geometric drawings (computer graphics). Understandably, artistic creation was dominated by computer scientists and only a few visual artists were involved. The computer was "best used for rather more schematic and geometric forms"[7] and was programmed to algorithmically produce geometric patterns based on predefined settings. In 1952, Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth created the abstract experimental film *Abstronic* with an oscilloscope, recording its visual output with a film camera. In the 1950s, mathematician

Figure 1. Joan Truckenbrod, Free Radical, Black and White Photograph, 1987 © the artist

and artist Ben F. Laposky also used an oscilloscope to create his series of *Oscillons* which he exhibited in several museums in a show entitled *Electronic Abstractions*.[8] In the early 1960s, computer scientist Ivan L. Finkle experimented with the digital replication of so-called Lissajous figures and with the aesthetics of computer-generated data visualizations. In 1965, engineer Michael Noll exhibited his abstract computer graphics in New York, and mathematician and computer scientist Frieder Nake, as well as graphic designer and mathematician Georg Nees, showed their works in Stuttgart in Germany. Around the same time, the physicist, mathematician, philosopher and writer Herbert W. Franke, who worked in electronic graphics since 1956, also created abstract works, such as *Tanz der Elektronen* (1962/63). These pioneers were interested in creating graphic formations through computer operations, thereby questioning the aesthetic value of these computer-generated images.[9] Engineers Kenneth Knowlton and Leon Harmon, computer scientist Leslie Mezei, Herbert W. Franke, and Charles Csuri began creating figurative images. However, among visual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, the computer as a generative medium was usually rejected.[10] Visual artists Manfred Mohr, trained as painter, and Vera Molnar, originally an art historian, finally explored the potential of the computer from a purely artistic perspective through their abstract and geometric plotter drawings. During the 1950s and 1960s, the computer was not particularly suitable for generating figurative imagery and therefore not used for self-portraiture.

In the 1970s, new technologies opened up possibilities for creating more figurative imagery. This enabled artists to include their self-image in their artworks. Artist Sonia Landy-Sheridan created her *The Magic Finger (Self Portrait with Pointing Finger)* with a photocopier in 1970. Mexican Humberto Jardón photocopied his body parts and especially his face in almost grotesque surreal poses in *Bodycopy* (circa. 1975). Lillian Schwartz digitally processed her own portrait in the work *Lillian II*, which she composed together with C.B. Rubenstein.[11] In the early 1970s, artists like Nam June Paik, Steina and Woody Vasulka and Ken Knowlton experimented with video synthesizers. These devices altered and distorted video footage by changing its axes, color intensity and other effects. The output from the display of the synthesizer was recorded with a video camera.[12] Laurence Gartel video-recorded his animated self-portrait (1978, in the Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) with a camera from Nam June Paik's video synthesizer.[13] Joan Truckenbrod worked with another device, the video digitizer, which scans objects line by line. She understood the video digitizer as a sculpting tool for time and light and the self-image as a powerful communicator that injects humanness into the digital and creates a synthesis of woman and machine. She references the process of personal change and transformation through the fluidity created by the video digitizer in *Ripped Distance* (1982) and *Morphic Resonance* (1982). *Free Radical* (1987) expresses her deep consternation with the AIDS crisis. She created a layered construction by superimposing digital

compositions on live video images of her face, which were then photographed in real-time. Sonia Landy-Sheridan was interested in the potential for electronic self-portraiture by a computerized painting system and created a self-portrait as part of her series *Drawing in Time* (1982) with EASEL software, Cromemco Z-2D hardware, and black & white video.[14] In *Self-Portrait* (1985), Andy Warhol digitally edited his own analog portrait on a Commodore Amiga computer.[15]

Combining video performance fragments and tools of the computer, the Australian artist Jill Scott and Mexican artist Pola Weiss created intriguing video works towards the end of the 1980s. In Pola Weiss's digital video performance work, *My Heart* (1986), the artist blends performance videos, close-ups of her body, digital elements, and digitally altered video excerpts into a surreal collage that she enriched with "footage she recorded of the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, which killed approximately 10,000 people."[16] In *Continental Drift* (1989), Jill Scott processes her illness of breast cancer. In her digitally layered, enhanced and mostly blue-colored video, she establishes connections between the geological conditions of our planet and the human body. Lynn Hershman-Leeson used video recording and editing tools to create her film series *Electronic Diaries* (1984 to 1996). As a precursor to vlogs or social media profiles, Hersman-Leeson interweaves her personal story including childhood memories of mobbing or abuse with historical or political references or current events. Digitally altered imagery of herself blends into video snippets from other contexts.

With the advent of the internet in the early 1990s, the topic of online or digital identity has become increasingly important. The internet offered a liminal space to recreate life in different ways, and the opportunity for users to present a virtual self within this space. In the early days of the web, people met online in text-based, anonymous Multi-User Domains, also called Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). MUDs provided a space where "virtual characters converse with each other, exchange gestures,[and] express emotions."[17] Artists started to reflect these crucial shifts in their social and personal lives. Tilman Baumgärtel identifies the "possibility to create a not directly verifiable online persona," "the construction of identity," and "body being present or absent in cyberspace" as important topics in artistic practice.[18] Artists explored issues of identity and gender by creating "false profiles, fictional avatars, collective identities and pseudonyms."[19] In their work *Darko Maver* (1998-99), Eva and Franco Mattes created a fictitious artist from found and appropriated materials taken from the Internet. Petko Dourmana addressed bodily aspects by allowing the users of his work *Metabolizer* (1997) to give different chemicals, drugs, medicines, or hormones to the artists' alter ego, which is then immediately reflected in the appearance of his virtual body. Eva Wohlgemuth's 4-channel video installation *Bodyscan* (2002) includes a digital 3D full-body scan of the artist. The users could freely rotate the artist's body in digital space. With *Brandon* (1998–1999), Shu Lea Cheang and collaborators created a year-long web-narrative and performance work that explored social and technological constructs of the gendered body. In 1994, Patrice Caire created the virtual reality experience *Cyberhead...Am I Really Existing*, which is based on a full-body MRI scan of her body. It allowed users to fly through the artist's head and to encounter her face in the virtual realm. *Mouchette* was an art project by Martine Neddam, who affirmed her authorship only in 2010. As a fictional adolescent girl named Mouchette, she addressed the detachment of the online persona from the real person. On her website, Mouchette.org (founded in 1996), Mouchette sets herself up as an "almost 13-year-old" artist from Amsterdam, accompanied by an invitation to communicate with her via email. Net artist Olia Lialina animated her appearance in several works, for example in her project *Animated GIF Model* (since 2015). In her early artwork *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996), an interactive website, the user reads the intimate conversation of a couple who has just been reunited. The online visitors click their way through the couple's incoherent conversation, clicking on text and image links within a system of pop-up frames. The chaotic structure resembles the miscommunication between them and ends on a melancholic note with black frames. Although Olia Lialina did not intend to create a personal story, by integrating an image of herself, she connects the female role within this Internet chamber play to her. Since the mid-nineties, the artist Renee Cox has used digital tools to embed her real-life self in new environments and contexts. Her superhero alter ego, Rajé, appears in Times Square, on packages of Uncle Ben's rice and Aunt Jemima waffles, and in front of the ancient Egyptian Sphinx. By referencing and recontextualizing places or objects of cultural history, she addresses the racial stereotypes that perpetuate systemic racism. Another artist who consciously uses the possibilities of digital image and video editing in conjunction with his own image is Bjørn Melhus. In works like *No Sunshine* (1997), he addresses questions of identity related to childhood memories and cloning. In *Again & Again* (1998), Melhus involves his (digital) clones in a conversation about replication. Artist Mariko Mori uses digital technologies and her own image in her video work *Nirvana* (1997), where she floats as a female Buddha above a calm lake among 3D generated Buddhist symbols.

The commercialization of the webcam in 1994 allowed web users to connect their real-life appearance to their online identity for the first time. Back then, a webcam only broadcasted static images every few seconds to a website

Figure 2. Rafaël Rozendaal, Whitetrash.nl, Website, 2001 © the artist

in real time. Still, the webcam was considered a "window into the personal life" that "promises authentic visual content."[20] In 1996, Jennifer Ringley used her webcam to showcase her daily life in front of an internet audience. This idea and practice was also implemented by the musician and visual artist Ana Voog. On August 22, 1997, she began *anacam*, which broadcasted twenty-four hours a day live from her home. Both considered nakedness or sex in front of the camera to be normal parts of daily life. With *Artist's Studio Spycam* (1997), the visitors of the exhibition of artist Matthieu Laurette at FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon, could see a live stream of the artist working in his Paris-based studio. Tina LaPorta's webcam project *Voyeur Web* consisted of a set of webcams broadcasting live from different rooms of the artist's apartment in July 2001.

During the early 2000s, several artists created websites as artworks. "Websites are today's most radical and important art objects,"[21] stated curator Miltos Manetas in 2002. He identified a new art movement or a new species of artists he called the "Neen," "Neenstar," or "Neenster." He defines a "Neen" as a visual artist who belongs to the contemporary art world and works in the field of software creation, web design, video games or as animator.[22] "Identity is not a priority for a Neenster, but one will fetishize oneself anyway and use that as a style: it's a fast way to produce content. But a Neenster, in contrast with contemporary artists, will change identities often, according to the situations."[23] Rafael Rozendaal's first website artwork, *whitetrash.nl* (2001), illustrates this notion of identity at its best and anticipates the idea of face filters. The website shows a cut-out close-up of the artist's face in front of a yellow backdrop. By clicking on his digitized forehead, the user can choose between five different black-painted, comic-like haircuts. Clicking on the eye area, five different types of glasses appear in a row and can then be selected. Clicking between mouth and nose offers five beard types. All the options can be combined with one another. The work reflects how easily online identity could be changed and played with. With the Neensters, a new generation of internet artists started to explore the advantages of the web instead of subverting or criticizing it like many of the net artists from the 1990s.

In 2004, the early days of Web 2.0, but before platforms like YouTube had been launched, artist Marisa Olson decided to become a candidate for the TV show *American Idol*. She "critically investigated the *American Idol* audition process and its perpetuation of gender stereotypes and normative beauty standards, as well as the show's perverse take on what it meant to be a 'good singer'."[24] Olson documented her several month-long performances on a blog, uploading texts and pictures of her audition process on which visitors of the site could comment. Olson created a personal narrative online and shared details about the process of changing her identity to make it suitable for *American Idol*. For the final audition day, Olson started a live mobile blog, which allowed her to use her cell phone to post snapshots from the set of the show via SMS.[25] She posted unedited pictures with short comments like "Coffee time!," "Running

late!," or "Party time!" Marisa Olson's blog anticipated artistic social media practices and performances that would become relevant a few years later.

Second Life (since 2003) is a computer-simulated world populated by avatars of real people, who choose the shape and identity of their avatars. For many artists, Second Life (SL) became an important and exciting place to explore the conditions of the digital in their work. Eva and Franco Mattes's avatars reenacted historical performances in SL, for example Valie Export's and Peter Weibel's *Tapp und Tastkino* (2007–10), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (2007–10), Chris Burden's *Shoot* (2007–10), Gilbert & George's *The Singing Sculpture* (2007–10), or Marina Abramovic's and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* (2007–10). Gazira Babeli, an avatar artist who only existed in SL, organized the Group Sculpture Performance *Come Together* (2007). On a pedestal, several avatars move into each other and deform into ever new abstract sculptures of naked digital bodies. Other artists on Second Life were Patrick Lichty a.k.a. Man Michinaga, who was active in SL performance groups like Second Front. Other artists on SL had been Cao Fei a.k.a. ChinaTracy, or the avatar artist LaTurbo Avedon. In *soc net vogue* (2013), Avedon performed to Madonna's *Vogue*. She uses six different settings, and similar to a webcam recording, the camera is steady. In her artistic research project *Avatar as Prosthesis* (2016–2017), Gretta Louw's SL avatar investigates the relationship between physical and virtual bodies by conducting interviews in Second Life, e.g. with artist Patrick Lichty, Kate Anthony from the Online Therapy Institute, or Sandra Danilovic, director of the Second Life documentary *Second Bodies* (2009). In these works, the connection between digital bodily representations and the possibilities for a digital self become visible.

The commercialization of built-in webcams in portable computers and the launch of the video-sharing platform YouTube (2005) meant that videos could easily be recorded and shared. Whereas webcam art of the 1990s explored candid self-broadcasting of daily life activities, the following generation of artists used webcams and online platforms to perform identities. In doing so, they exposed themselves to an anonymous online audience, and the interaction between the artist and their audience remained an integral part of artistic webcam culture. In her 18 month-long YouTube project *Scandalishious* (2008–2009), Ann Hirsch reflects on the different archetypes of female online self-representation that developed in the decade following the commercialisation of the webcam. She performed the persona of Caroline, a self-described "'hipster college freshman' who danced for the camera, vlogged, and interacted with her followers."[26] In *VVEBCAM* (2007), artist Petra Cortright stares at her screen while exploring her webcam's default visual effects, like animated pizza slices. When publishing the work on YouTube, Cortright used metadata tags that were usually used by spam accounts, like "tits vagina sex nude boobs britney spears paris hilton."[27] Thus, she attracted visitors (particularly a non-art audience), who had expected decidedly different content and commented on her video accordingly. Martin Kohout filmed himself watching YouTube videos for a whole year from April 2010 to March 2011. His YouTube channel "Watching Martin Kohout" contains 821 videos. Constant Dullaart's *DVD Screensaver performances* (2009) show how the artist ironically recreates an analog screensaver. He uses a print-out DVD sign and moves it in front of the camera as if it was a screensaver on the viewer's screen. Kate Durbin interacts with a non-art, porn-interested audience in her performance *Cloud Nine* (2015). She poses live as a cam girl on the sex video chat site Cam4, interacts with the users, and simultaneously streams the performance to the art platform New Hive, whose visitors could only watch and not interact with her. In the two-hour performance, she repeatedly asks her audience for answers to the question "What have you done for money?" in order to discuss precarious work conditions, especially of female artists. Another artist who performed on Cam4 is Georges Jacotey. In his webcam performance *2night Im gonna cum 4u (see my face as I cum 4u internet)* (2013), he executes an almost 30-minute-long dance and striptease performance, using several props like chairs and a large mirror, as well as the digital tools for augmentation and selfie filters. The artist deals with issues of queer representation and resistance, and the divide between subculture and cultural hegemony.

Other artists, like Tabita Rezaire, Shana Moulton, Jeremy Bailey, and Maya Ben David, combine their real-life appearance and performances with digital elements. Self-proclaimed "Famous New Media Artist Jeremy Bailey" augments his body with rudimentary digital adornments. In *The Web I Want* (2015), the artist chatters without pause about the fantastic possibilities the internet offers for him. He appears in denim shorts and his naked torso is covered by two clocks, stock prices, and weather forecasts, all resembling oversized nipples, which move in accordance with his body. Maya Ben David stages a variety of roles in her video works that encompass a range of significant digital features and are often based on fan art and cosplay. In *Air Canada Gal* (2015–present), she serenely performs a Canadian anthropomorphic airplane wearing a mask that resembles an airplane's bow. In *Harry Potter and The Unborn Child* (2019–present), she stages the story of a pregnant male wizard. In her multimedia installations and video works, especially the series *Whispering Pines* (2002 - today), Shana Moulton stages her alter ego Cynthia. Strongly related to the conditions and surroundings of her own upbringing, she uses Cynthia as a mirror to reflect on social conditions,

Figure 3. Maya Ben David, Air Canada Gal, 2015 © the artist

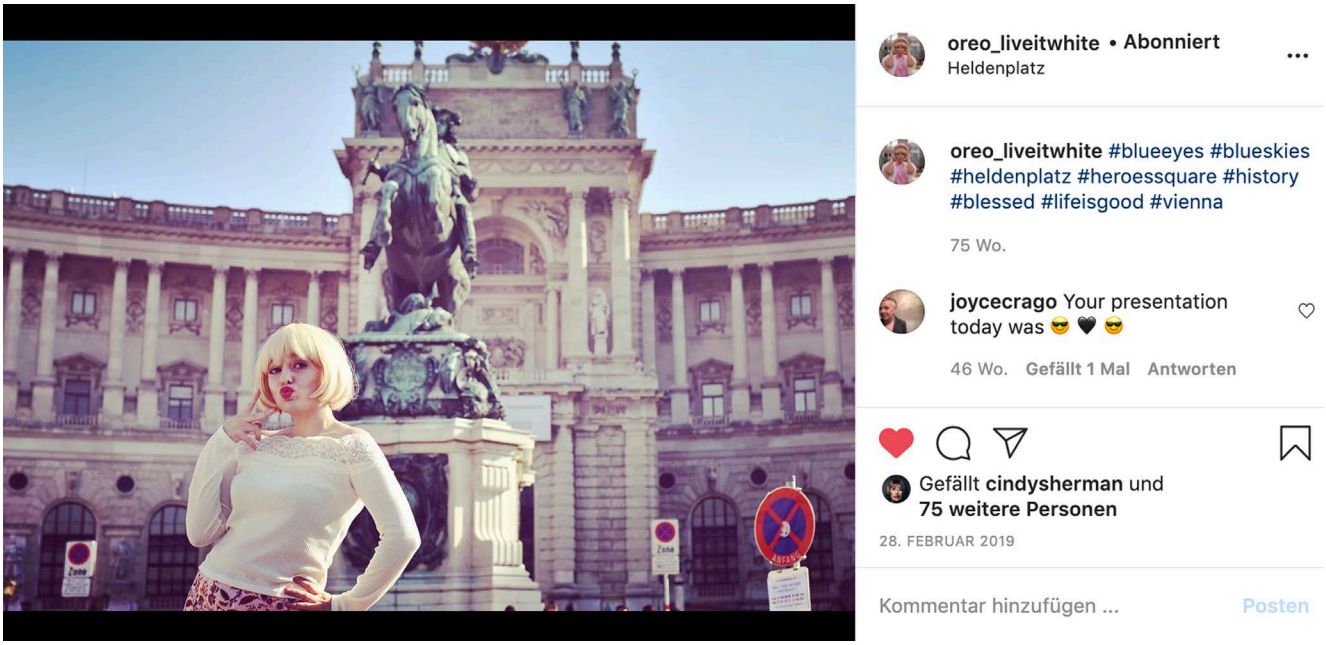

Figure 4. Rah Eleh, Oreo: Duckface@Heldenplatz, Vienna, 2019 © the artist

female spirituality, climate change, the influences of technologies, and anxieties, such as agoraphobia—a mental illness that Lynn Hershman Leeson's character *Lorna* (1979), performed by Joanna Mross, also suffered from.[28] Tabita Rezaire works at the intersection of performance, video, and digital image culture. She exposes herself to a wide range of collaged digital visual references, for example in her self-portrait series *Inner Fire* (2016-17). Her topics evolve around ancestral memory, colonialism, the African Diaspora, injustices or discrimination as well as spirituality, healing, personal growth or womxnhood.

In 2010, the iPhone 4 was launched, the first Apple smartphone that included video recording, a front-facing camera, and a high-definition resolution. Combined with an instant Internet connection to social media platforms like Instagram, it was the technological foundation that made selfie culture ubiquitous and spawned artistic inquiry and reflection of the selfie as a social phenomenon. Today, artists widely use Instagram to post photos, live videos, or performances, either as artworks or as documentation. Moreover, a work of art can be recorded as a live performance on Instagram, but later shared on another video platform, such as Vimeo or YouTube. Performative aspects play a major role in artistic self-expression on social media, which often includes a reflection of the conditions and regulations of the platform itself. Artist Molly Soda engages in webcam performances that she usually records in her bedroom. The viewer experiences her staging everyday activities as in *Exile in Camville*, crying in *Who's Sorry Now*, or singing karaoke in her Instagram performance *That's Me in The Corner* (all 2017). Soda is interested in the reflection of authentic human emotions that are omitted on social media. Arvida Byström stages herself on Instagram via a stylized feminine visual language immersed in shades of pink. She thematizes the naturalness of her own body image. Both Soda and Byström fight against censorship on Instagram, which does not allow unshaven legs, female nipples and menstrual blood, yet does allow and promote clichéd female images featuring busty, sexy women in tight underwear. In their book *Pics or It Didn't Happen: Images Banned from Instagram* (2017), published together with Chris Kraus, they assembled pictures of their friends and themselves that were deleted by Instagram because they violated the platform's Community Guidelines. In her videos and performances, Signe Pierce publicly and confidently presents her body and [female] identity, usually accompanied by spoken or written texts that reveal her approach to life and her surroundings. Self-affirmation and staying true to identity is central to the work of these three artists.

Other artists engage in staging roles on Instagram, like Leah Schrager as ONA, Andy Kassier, Rah Eleh or Amalia Ulman. In her four-month-long Instagram performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), Ulman staged a transition through multiple stereotypes of female self-representation on social media. She becomes an escort, augments her breasts, has nervous breakdowns, and subsequently redeems herself in the healthy mindfulness lifestyle of the West Coast. Many of her followers mistook the performance as a part of Amalia Ulman's real life because there was no clear boundary that demarcated it as otherwise. In her second Instagram performance *Privilege* (2016), Amalia Ulman staged the story of an office worker who becomes pregnant. Again, many people mistook the plot for being real. The fact that Amalia Ulman used her own appearance, her Instagram account with her real name, themes and a visual language that echoed the conventions of authentic Instagram content, led to this false assumption on behalf of many users. On his Instagram account, Andy Kassier

Figure 5. Martina Menegon, all around me are familiar faces, 2018 © the artist

ironically poses as an elegant, rich, and successful man. He appropriates the visual language he sees on other Instagram accounts and creates a light pastel color palette in order to scrutinize and play with representations of masculinity. The artist Rah Eleh examines nationalism in the digital age through the online persona Oreo (@oreo_liveitwhite). "Oreo" is a colloquial term to describe a black individual who uncritically performs whiteness. These individuals are said to be "black on the outside and white on the inside." Many racialized groups have a term designated to people of colour who seem to have internalized white supremacy.[29] Oreo reenacts the characteristics assigned to whiteness while distancing herself from her racialized identity. She performs characteristics of the term *white*; she speaks the dominant language with a clear Anglicized accent, dresses in playful pastels, and has blond hair and blue eyes. Additionally, she appropriates symbols, visuals, and hashtags used by nationalists, the alt-right, and neo-nazis in her posts to shed light on the hidden language used by the groups. Leah Schrager invented an alter ego named ONA (Online persoNA) to explore the possibilities of getting famous with the help of online tools. In this context, she engages with the male gaze and female objectification in the digital age. The sex and body positive ONA sexily poses almost naked on Instagram and pursues a career as a singer and musician, and has thus acquired three million followers on Instagram at the beginning of 2020.

Besides having cultivated huge fan bases, the two highly contrasting approaches of today's artistic female self-representation on Instagram—on the one hand artists like Molly Soda or Arvida Byström and on the other ONA—sadly still provoke many reactions that are sexist, discriminating, and verbally abusive. They reveal how the female body is still considered an object by a large portion of people, who feel they have the right to police and subject its image according to their own preferences.

Today's digital artists often work with 3D modelling or scanning technologies. Artist Sondra Perry uses her digital avatar head which is based on scans of her own physique in several of her works. In *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), the viewer sits down on the small seat of a bike workstation ready for exercise and physical self-optimization. Being encircled and immersed in three screens, the viewer encounters Sondra Perry's animated digital head up close. Her avatar then starts a conversation about bodily conditions, discrimination, identity, blackness and technology. The artist Echo Can Luo employs a robot-like avatar featuring her 3D-scanned face in the 3D video installation *Chocho studio reshaping the face – beauty score / Chapter 1* (2019). Chocho is a fictitious face reshaping studio, where young women who want their faces remodeled after their digital selfie-filtered face seek surgery. The video evokes the

Figure 6. Jonas Blume, Rhythm Zero Los Santos, online performance/HD video, 112 min, 2019 © the artist

work of the body-art and performance artist ORLAN, who, as a part of her artistic practice, has undergone plastic surgeries since the late 1970s to resemble famous female figures from art history. Later, she manipulated her facial appearance with digital software in the series *Self-Hybridization* (1998–2000). The artist and curator LaTurbo Avedon exists online as a CGI generated avatar who also appears in her own artworks frequently, living out and researching the possibilities of an entirely digital identity. The artist Lu Yang uses her 3D-scanned head and body in her digital videos and installations in a variety of different roles and human-snake hybrid creatures. She builds digital worlds in which she merges references to manifold Asian cultures, Hindu and Buddhist religion, Japanese manga, goddesses and superheroes, computer games, and heaven and hell. Her cosmos resembles an intense, complex, fabulous, enthralling, fast-paced techno-feminist universe.

Another artist who frequently works with digital self-portraiture is Carla Gannis. In her series *The Selfie Drawings* (2015), she embarked on a year-long journey to explore her digital identity in 52 digital drawings. She first explored her appearance in the digital mirror and later placed her alter ego in new contexts. With works like *Selfie Drawing 41 "Babel in Wonderland," Selfie Drawing 38 "Plato's Cave," or Selfie Drawing 44 "Golden Shower,"* her series is full of references to digital and pop culture, art history, and everyday life. Later, Gannis extended the series to animated versions of herself and an augmented reality series. Through her digital alter ego C.A.R.L.A. G.A.N. (2017–present), Gannis started to further explore and research online identities and virtual avatars on several online platforms.

Other artists deal with self-representation and 3D modelling of their own appearance or digital alter egos in Virtual Reality. Theo Triantafyllidis created the virtual reality experience *Self Portrait (Interior)* (2016), in which the user literally enters the inner state of the artist by walking on a long tongue that sticks out from the open mouth of his monumental head. In the mixed reality installation *Studio Visit* (2018), the artist premieres as a persona he calls "the Ork." The big, muscly creature in a bikini with large breasts and extra-long lower canine teeth, lizard-like legs, a long blue ponytail, and a deep voice evokes manifold associations to body-building, queer culture, hyper-femininity, and hyper-masculinity alike. Artist Martina Menegon exposes her nude, 3D-scanned body in her VR experience *Plug in your nose and try to hum* (2017). Users can drag, distort or flick away the artist's small naked body, which appears in a size of several centimeters and in innumerable copies. In Menegon's VR experience *all around me are familiar faces* (2018), the viewer encounters mask-like faces of the artist in various sizes. The artist Mohsen Hazrati constantly reappears in his ongoing digital self-portrait project, the VR

experience *Tey-AI-Tool* (2017-ongoing). By embedding his digital self in virtual 3D worlds often based on his personal surroundings of his hometown Shiraz, he creates a powerful, chromatic and dynamic cosmos.

Another visual component of self-representation in the digital age is the artistic engagement with fluidity; digital distortion or abstract shapes are generated by a variety of tools. In her digital photo collages, Erica Lapadat-Janzen engages with the potential of image editing to alienate her own appearance. She duplicates her eyes, replaces her face with her mouth, or her eyes with her tongue. In doing so, she often retains the portrait-like quality of the image, or sometimes dissolves her facial features in kaleidoscopic flowing patterns. In his series *self-contained* (2019), Doug Rosman creates digital interpretations of his own moving body with the help of a neural network. In his photography-based works, artist Rollin Leonard examines the deformation, decomposition and reorganization of elements of the human body in digital and real life realms through his own body and face. In his monumental *Self Portrait with Drops* (2020), he combines elements from his two series *Flat Faces* and *Water Portraits and Figures* (both 2016-ongoing). In *Flat Faces*, he "rolls out" photographed faces like a digital UV map, and in *Water Portraits and Figures*, he photographs body parts through a watery lense to then reassemble the droplike elements on the image surface, in this case his flat face.

Several artists constantly mix different image types, such as computer-generated imagery, 3D scans, and video footage of themselves, and thereby focus on performative aspects in their works. In his complex 3D-animated video series *Reifying Desire 1 – 6* (2011–14), Jacolby Satterwhite creates overlapping sceneries inhabited by humanoid figures. The pieces are based on 3D versions of his mother's drawings, animated 3D scans of his body and video footage of real-life performances, photographs, digital drawings and animations. Satterwhite references digital and pop culture, art history, and thus composes a surrealist, twisted virtual world. The artist RaFia Santana works with digital animations and collages, GIFs, photo footage or short selfie-videos. Her chromatic and luminous palette serenely contrasts the serious topics she engages with, like racism, feminism, sexism, black identity, struggle of survival, corruption, or police violence. Her animated GIF *Hit Me Baby* (2016) features a coin-like revolving signature stamp of a comic-like digital self-portrait. The digital collage *WORKED* (2015) shows the artist in a contorted, (for a human) physiologically unachievable pose, revealing the "best" view on one of her naked breasts and buttocks at the same time. With one hand, she covers her right eye, while with her left eye, she fixates on the viewer with a strong relentless expression. Jonas Blume works extensively with his self-image in several forms, including selfies and his real-life identity, alter egos, 3D scans, and remodeled avatars in video games. The digital video *Predictive Biography* (2018) features an abstracted 3D-scanned animation of his head, which recites (in Apple's Siri voice) his own biography, which was generated by himself and his phone's predictive texting feature. In the online performance *Rhythm Zero Los Santos* (2019), the artist left his avatar idling motionlessly around the virtual map of the multi-player game Grand Theft Auto, waiting for other players. As a result of his passivity, he is constantly exposed to brutal attacks. The title refers to the performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) by Marina Abramovic.[30] Abramovic created her own VR experience *Rising* (2018) on the topic of climate change in which the viewer encounters a lifelike animated 3D-scanned, full-bodied version of the artist, who is caught in a glass tank that slowly fills with water.

The brief survey of artistic self-representation in digital art within the scope of this essay demonstrates the immense variety of media, themes, and artistic approaches in the genre. The connection between artistic expressions that take place on many different online platforms and in offline installations forms a multifaceted arena for artistic self-expression. A clear media-specific or platform-oriented categorization therefore seems futile. But it is feasible to identify different axes on which the artists interact thematically and formally. Some artists aim to perform an expression of the self that is often perceived as authentic or genuine by the viewers (Ana Voog, Molly Soda, Signe Pierce, Amalia Ulman, Lynn Hershman Leeson).[31] Other artists rather perform roles and alter egos (Maya Ben David, Leah Schrager as ONA, Kate Durbin, Andy Kassier, Shana Moulton). While some artists translate their real appearance into the digital realm on social and video platforms (Arvida Byström, Leah Schrager, Molly Soda, Andy Kassier), others digitally enhance their video performances and append their real appearances with digital imagery (Bjørn Melhus, Maya Ben David, Leah Schrager, Jeremy Bailey, Renee Cox, RaFia Santana, Tabita Rezaire, Joan Truckenbrod). Certain artists mainly use 3D-scanned imagery of themselves (Sondra Perry, Lu Yang, Theo Triantafyllidis, Martina Menegon), or digitally drawn lifelike avatars (Carla Gannis), and some exist only as avatars (Gazira Babeli, LaTurbo Avedon). Several artists employ different digital manifestations and representations of self in their artworks (Jonas Blume, Jacolby Satterwhite). Some artists frequently work with their self-image (Maya Ben David, Carla Gannis, Lu Yang, Jacolby Satterwhite, Jonas Blume), whereas in the work of other artists, use of one's own image appears only occasionally (Lillian Schwartz, Rollin Leonard, Doug Rosman, Rafael Rozendaal, Petra Cortright).

This diversity adds to the difficulty of incorporating digital art, especially self-representative kinds, into the structured art historical canon. For centuries art history only needed to distinguish between painting, sculpture, and architecture, in which self-portraiture was a clearly defined category that pertained mostly to painting. In addition, digital art is primarily presented on the Internet (on websites, blogs, or social media), i.e. in places that are not predefined art spaces, like museums or galleries. Therefore, digital art disrupts and bypasses the traditional art system. But fortunately, the post-digital and post-internet age goes along with the understanding that digital life does not exist hermetically separated from the physical world but enters a symbiosis in which virtuality and reality overlap—just like art and life do not exist separately from one another. This paves the way for digital art to become part of the art historical narrative. The wide-ranging, diverse, non-binary, and nonlinear world views arising with the generation of digital natives, who have internalized the human condition post-Internet while growing up, will further inform the art historical perspective and alter its trajectory. Art historian Catrin Lorch examined the new presentation of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, after its renovation and emphasized its anachronistic and diverse concept, which declares the end of the canon of art history, but nevertheless has been maintained over the past decades by MoMA, one of the most important museums for Western art.[32] For Sebastian Moll the installation of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) situated next to Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) exemplifies this anachronism and recontextualization of the collection, abandoning the traditional historical classification in favor of establishing thematic lineage and connection between works.[33] Moreover, there is no longer a prescribed path through the galleries, inviting visitors to find their own ways through the spaces, where a portion of the artworks will be replaced every six months with other works from the collection.[34] The new thematic approach to the presentation of the MoMA's collection is a tremendous leap towards a new understanding of art history, driven by the circumstance and potential of the Internet. As Lorch observes, "the next generation of art historians no longer grows up with cased reference books and chronologically sorted art libraries, but navigates through the visual worlds of the Internet with search engines that access artworks of all museums and collections."[35] The digital age changes not only how we create art, but also how we see, research, and understand it.

Tina Sauerlaender pursues a Ph.D. in the department of Interface Cultures, Art University, Linz, Austria. Her topic is Artistic Self-Representation in Digital Art. Her Ph.D. research is supervised by Prof. Christa Sommerer, Linz, and Christiane Paul, associate professor in the School of Media Studies at The New School, New York.

Alphabetical list of mentioned artists dealing with artistic self-representation

Marina Abramovic, LaTurbo Avedon, Gazira Babeli, Jeremy Bailey, Jonas Blume, Arvida Byström, Patrice Caire, Petra Cortright, Renee Cox, Maya Ben David, Kate Durbin, Petko Dourmana, Constant Dullaart, Echo Can Luo, Rah Eleh, Carla Gannis, Laurence Gartel, Mohsen Hazrati, Lynn Hershman-Leeson, Ann Hirsch, Georges Jacotey, Humberto Jardón, Andy Kassier, Martin Kohout, Sonia Landy-Sheridan, Erica Lapadat-Janzen, Tina LaPorta, Matthieu Laurette, Rollin Leonard, Olia Lialina, Patrick Lichty, Gretta Louw, Eva and Franco Mattes, Bjørn Melhus, Martina Menegon, Mariko Mori, Shana Moulton, Martine Neddam (Mouchette), Marisa Olson, ORLAN, Sondra Perry, Signe Pierce, Tabita Rezaire, Doug Rosman, Rafael Rozendaal, RaFia Santana, Jacolby Satterwhite, Leah Schrager, Lillian Schwartz, Jill Scott, Shu Lea Cheang, Molly Soda, Theo Triantafyllidis, Joan Truckenbrod, Amalia Ulman, Ana Voog, Andy Warhol, Pola Weiss, Eva Wohlgemuth, Lu Yang

NOTES

[1] Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves. Women's Self-Portraits* (London: Thames & Hudson,1998/2016); Martina Weinhart, *Selbstbild ohne Selbst: Dekonstruktionen eines Genres* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer,2004); Pascal Bonafoux *Moi Je, par soi-même, L'Autoportrait au XXe siècle* (Paris: Diane de Selliers,2004); Ulrich Pfisterer and Valeska von Rosen, eds., *Der Künstler als Kunstwerk. Selbstporträts vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005); James Hall, *The Self-Portrait. A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson,2014); Hans Belting, *Face and Mask. A Double History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013/2017).

[2] Cynthia Goodman, *Digital Visions: Computers and Art* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1987) and Wolf Lieser, ed., *Digital Art, Neue Wege in der Kunst* (Rheinbreitbach: h.f.ullmann publishing, 2010). Lynn Hershman Leeson, ed., *Clicking In. Hot Links To A Digital Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996) includes a chapter on "the Body." Christiane Paul *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2003) includes a chapter on "Body and Identity. " Edward A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media* (London/New York: Phaidon, 2009) has a chapter on *Bodies, Surrogates, Emergent Systems*.

[3] Dominique Molon, *L'art Au-delà du digital* (Lyon: Nouvelles éditions Scala, 2018); Alfred Weidinger and Anika Meier, eds, *Virtual Normality. The Female Gaze in the Age of the Internet* (Wien: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2018); Eva Respini, *Art in the Age of the Internet. 1989 to Today* (Boston, Massachusetts: The Institute of Contemporary Art; New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018).

[4] Christiane Paul, "Digital Art Now: Histories of (Im)Materialities," *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 5 History of Digital Art (2020), accessed October 15, 2020, https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dah/article/view/75504/69160

[5] Christiane Paul, "Digital Art Now: Histories of (Im)Materialities," *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 5 History of Digital Art (2020), accessed October 15, 2020, https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dah/article/view/75504/69160

[6] Thomas Dreher, "Net Art: Einführung, " accessed December 20, 2019, iasl.uni-muenchen.de/links/NAEinf.html.

[7] Jasia Reichardt, *Cybernetic Serendipity. the computer and the arts*, 2nd edition (New York/Washington: Studio International), 71.

[8] Ben F. Laposky, *Oscillons. Electronic Abstractions*, 1953 ,accessed June 8, 2020, vasulka.org/archive/Artists3/Laposky,BenF/ElectronicAbstractions.pdf.

[9] Hubertus Kohle and Katja Kwastek, *Computer, Kunst und Kunstgeschichte* (Cologne: Deubner, 2003), 117.

[10] Karin Guminski, *Kunst am Computer. Ästhetik, Bildtheorie und Praxis des Computerbildes* (Berlin: Reimer, 2002), 58.

[11] Guminski, *Kunst am Computer. Ästhetik, Bildtheorie und Praxis des Computerbildes*, 132.

[12] Thomas Dreher, "Video Cultures " accessed December 20, 2019, iasl.uni-muenchen.de/links/GCAPDF/GCAPDF-IV.1e.html. "Video synthesizers and processors were analog computers constructed to process images by controlling the movement of electron beams in cathode ray tubes. These movements were often not storable otherwise than by recordings of the monitors."

[13] Watch Laurence Gartel's work in: Transfer Gallery, "NarGlFsus", February 28, 2020, vimeo.com/159504170 (from minute 7.12 on).

[14] Edward A. Shanken, ed, *Art and Electronic Media* (New York: Phaidon, 2009), 86.

[15] Melissa Locker, "Andy Warhol's Lost Amiga Computer Art Recovered After 30 Years," accessed December 20, 2019, time.com/75658/andy-warhol-amiga-art-recovered.

[16] Erandy Vergara, "Electronic Traces: Archaeological Perspectives of Media Art in Mexico", accessed September 9, 2020, archee.qc.ca/ar.php?page=article&no=430.

[17] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 183.

[18] Tilman Baumgärtel, "Das Internet als imaginäres Museum," in WZB Discussion Paper FS II, (Berlin, 1998), 98–110, duplox.wzb.eu/texte/tb/.

[19] Marie Lechner, "Can Identity be Calculated," in *Ego Update. A History of the Selfie*, Alain Bieber, eds. (Cologne: Walther König, 2015), 275.

[20] Andrea Zapp, "Live – A User's Manual. Künstlerische Skizzen zur Ambivalenz von Webcam und Wirklichkeit" in *Authentizität. Diskussionen eines ästhetischen Begriffs*, eds, Susanne Knaller and Harro Müller, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 318.

[21] Miltos Manetas, "Websites, the art of our times," accessed August 15, 2019, manetas.com/eo/wb/files/man.htm.

[22] Miltos Manetas, "Neen Manifeto," accessed August 15, 2019, manetas.com/txt/neenmanifesto.html.

[23] Manetas, "Websites, the art of our times."

[24] Connor, Michael, with Dean, Arja and Espenschied, Dragan eds., *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, (New York: Rhizome, 2019), 222.

[25] Michael Connor, "The Politics of Participating in Pop Culture," accessed December 15, 2019, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2017/jun/02/the-politics-of-participating-in-pop-culture-an-interview-with-marisa-olson/.

[26] "Scandalischious," accessed November 19, 2019, anthology.rhizome.org/scandalishious.

[27] Paul Soulellis, "The Post as Medium," in *The Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, eds. Michael Connor, Arja Dean and Dragan Espenschied, (New York: Rhizome, 2019), 428.

[28] Julia Ihls, "Lorna", accessed October 15, 2020. https://zkm.de/en/artwork/lorna.

[29] Definition of the term "Oreo" by the artist Rah Eleh during a talk with the author on May 6th, 2020. Rah Eleh's reasoning for selecting this name is based on a personal and pivotal moment during her adolescence where she was confronted for the first time about her problematic performance of whiteness and called an "Oreo."

[30] During the several hour-long performance, the artist behaved entirely passively but invited the audience in the gallery to perform actions on her with 72 provided objects. This resulted in numerous physical border crossings and only ended when someone intervened when someone else held a loaded revolver to her head.

[31] The artists' names here and in the subsequent brackets refer to the previously introduced artworks only.

[32] Catrin Lorch, "Endlich Frei," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, October 17, 2019, sueddeutsche.de/kultur/museum-of-modern-art-kunstgeschichte-1.4642936.

[33] Sebastian Moll, "Abschied von den 100 weißen Männern," *Sueddeustche Zeitung*, October 21, 2019, sueddeutsche.de/kultur/museum-of-modern-art-moma-wiedereroeffnung-new-york-1.4642938.

[34] Moll, "Abschied von den 100 weißen Männern. "

[35] Lorch, "Endlich Frei."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baumgärtel, Tilman. "Das Internet als imaginäres Museum," Accessed February 28, 2020. duplox.wzb.eu/texte/tb/.

Belting, Hans. *Face and Mask. A Double History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013/2017.

Bieber, Alain, ed. *Ego Update. A History of the Selfie*, Cologne: Walther König, 2015.

Bonafoux, Pascal. *Moi Je, par soi-même, L'Autoportrait au XXe siècle*. Paris: Diane de Selliers, 2004.

Borzello, Frances. *Seeing Ourselves. Women's Self-Portraits*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1998/2016.

Connor, Michael, Arja Dean, and Dragan Espenschied et. al. eds. T*he Art Happens Here: Net Art Anthology*, New York: Rhizome 2019.

Connor, Michael. "Text Your Vote. Marisa Olson on pop culture, politics, and her American Idol training blog." Accessed February 28, 2020. rhizome.org/editorial/2017/jun/02/the-politics-of-participating-in-pop-culture-an-interview-with-marisa-olson/.

Dreher, Thomas. "NetArt: Einführung." Accessed February 28, 2020. iasl.uni-muenchen.de/links/NAEinf.html

Dreher, Thomas, "Images in Motion." Accessed February 28, 2020. iasl.uni-muenchen.de/links/GCAPDF/GCAPDF-IV.1e.html

Goodman, Cynthia. *Digital Visions. Computers and Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams & Everson Museum of Art, 1987.

Guminski, Karin. Kunst am Computer. *Ästhetik, Bildtheorie und Praxis des Computerbildes*. Berlin: Reimer, 2002.

Hall, James. *The Self-Portrait. A Cultural History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2014.

Hershman Leeson, Lynn, ed. *Clicking In. Hot Links To A Digital Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1996.

Ihls, Julia, "Lorna.", Accessed October 15, 2020. zkm.de/en/artwork/lorna.

Knaller, Susanne, and Harro Müller, eds. *Authentizität. Diskussionen eines ästhetischen Begriffs*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2006.

Kohle, Hubertus, and Katja Kwastek. *Computer, Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*. Cologne: Deubner, 2003.

Lieser, Wolf, ed. *Digital Art, Neue Wege in der Kunst*. Rheinbreitbach: h.f.ullmann publishing, 2010.

Locker, Melissa. *Andy Warhol's Lost Amiga Computer Art Recovered After 30 Years*. Accessed February 28, 2020. time.com/75658/andy-warhol-amiga-art-recovered.

Lorch, Catrin. "Endlich Frei. " *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. October 17,2019. sueddeutsche.de/kultur/museum-of-modern-art-kunstgeschichte-1.4642936.

Manetas, Miltos. "Websites, the art of our times." Accessed February 28, 2020. manetas.com/eo/wb/files/man.htm.

Manetas, Miltos. "Neen Manifesto." Accessed February 28, 2020. manetas.com/txt/neenmanifesto.html.

Moll, Sebastian, "Abschied von den 100 weißen Männern." *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. October 21,2019. sueddeutsche.de/kultur/museum-of-modern-art-moma-wiedereroeffnung-new-york-1.4642938.

Moulon, Dominique. *L'art Au-delà du digital*. Lyon: Nouvelles éditions Scala, 2018.

"Scandalishious." *Net Art Anthology*. Accessed February 28, 2020. anthology.rhizome.org/scandalishious.

Paul, Christiane. *Digital Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003/2015.

Paul, Christiane. "Digital Art Now: Histories of (Im)Materialities." *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 5 History of Digital Art, 2020.

Pfisterer, Ulrich, and Valeska von Rosen, eds. *Der Künstler als Kunstwerk. Selbstporträts vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005.

Reichardt, Jasia. *Cybernetic Serendipity. the computer and the arts*, London: Studio International Foundation, 2018.

Respini, Eva. *Art in the Age of the Internet*. 1989 to Today. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art ; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, and Lori Emerson, and Benjamin J. Robertson. *Guide To Digital Media*. Baltimore: J. Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Shanken, Edward A.. *Art and Electronic Media*. London and New York City: Phaidon, 2009.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Vergara, Erandy. *Electronic Traces: Archaeological Perspectives of Media Art in Mexico*. Accessed September 9, 2020. archee.qc.ca/ar.php?page=article&no=430.

Weinhart, Martina. *Selbstbild ohne Selbst: Dekonstruktionen eines Genres*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 2004.

Weidinger, Alfred, and Anika Meier, eds. *Virtual Normality*. The Female Gaze in the Age of the Internet. Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2018.

Cover image: Carla Gannis, detail of *Selfie Drawing 38* "Plato's Cave," 2015

TINA SAUERLAENDER is an art historian, curator and writer based in Berlin. She holds a MA in art history from Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich and is a Ph.D. candidate at The University of Art and Design Linz (Austria). Her research topic is artistic self-representation in digital art. For 10 years, she has been working as an international curator with her exhibition platform *peer to space*. In her exhibitions, she focuses on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and society. Together with curator Erandy Vergara she developed the exhibition series Critical Approaches in Virtual Reality Art and realized projects like *Envisioning the Future. Other World Perspectives in Virtual Reality Art* (Halcyon Arts Lab, Washington, DC, 2018) or *Speculative Cultures. A Virtual Reality Art Exhibition* (Kellen Gallery, Parsons/The New School, New York, 2019). She is the co-founder of Radiance VR, an international online research platform for virtual reality experiences in visual arts. She is the founder of the SALOON, an international network for women working in art.

Correspondence e-mail: tina@peertospace.eu