Am I Seen?: The Reciprocal Nature of Identity as Technology.

By Leo Selvaggio

"Am I seen?" is a question I have been asking myself for several decades now. As a young boy with white skin trying to embody the culture of his immigrant Colombian family, as a queer teenager who could pass as straight, and as an artist examining the materiality of his own identity, *if*, *how*, and *when* am I seen have been integral questions in developing both my creative research and making practice. What I have recognized over the years is that there is a tenuous relationship between the identity that refers to the self – the conglomeration of thoughts and values I have about myself as an individual – and the perceived identity others have interpreted and adopted. The image I have of myself is not always the image that is seen. When thinking about this relationship, I am reminded of a quote by John Berger from the beginning of his seminal work on the nature of the image as object, *Ways of Seeing*:

> Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.[1]

Identity is a product of our own internal creation, but it is also created in the perception or "eye" of an external other, and this relationship is reciprocal. My identity, "Leo," exists in multiplicity, within the perceptions and memories of several others. Who I am is relative. This thinking has led me to pursue the notion that identity is flexible, mutable, and ultimately collaborative.

When viewed through this lens, to answer my opening question with a binary "yes" or "no" seems illogical. A better question would be, "How much of the identity I create and present is seen, and how can I actuate or control the manner in which it is seen?" This question is more pressing with the advent of social media platforms. The technologies behind Facebook, Twitter, and other social media have shifted the makeup of individual identity dramatically towards the external. The presentation and thus construction of identity now occurs on a global scale, and authorship over one's persona on the Internet is decidedly distributed. Data mining by marketing companies, practices like Twitter doxing[2], and facial recognition photo tagging are all examples of this relatively new trend of external media and information generation about the individual.

While this may sound like a nightmare, there is hope in models like artist Roy Ascott's 1983 piece *La Plissure du Texte*. In this telematic artwork, Ascott collaborated with artists from around the world to simultaneously author a single text from multiple

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[1] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 9.

[2] "Doxing" refers to the Internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting private or identifiable information (especially personally identifiable information) about an individual or organization.

locations. In his essay "Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?" he describes how both the internal and external can exist collaboratively:

> Telematic culture means, in short, that we do not think, see, or feel in isolation. Creativity is shared, authorship is distributed. Telematic culture amplifies the individual's capacity for creative thought and action, for more vivid and intense experience, for more informed perception, by enabling a participation in the production of global vision through networked interaction with other minds, other sensibilities, other sensing and thinking systems across the planet – thought circulating in the medium of data through a multiplicity of different cultural, geographical, social, and personal layers.[3]

In Ascott's view, the relationship between the individual and technology is a positive one. This relationship between the self and technology became the foundation for my research, not only because I agree with Ascott, but because my approach to technology is the same as it is to identity: a reciprocal relationship between the internal and external.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will consider technology to be the externalization of an internal human process or ability into a "tool" to be used by an other. For example, language is the externalization of thought for the purpose of communication with an other. The abacus is a tool that physically demonstrates an internal mathematical process. Therefore, technology can be thought of as a means by which we "share" with others by externalizing that which would normally come from an internal self through invention. Take the journal – or more appropriately, the blog – for instance, which allows us to commit our internal thoughts to paper. By doing so, we are able to externally store what would otherwise require considerable memorization, allowing our mental capacity free for other tasks. In this way, technology acts as a prosthesis of sorts.

The best example of Ascott's theory on distributed authorship in modern day is open-source culture. "Open-source" is the practice and belief that technology's fullest potential is achieved through community-oriented collaboration rather than the corporate pursuit of proprietary production. This practice, which is prominent in software development, starts with an individual software engineer sharing a base program, known as a kernel, with a community. The community is encouraged to not only use the kernel program but to modify, add to, and even rewrite the program to either make it better or to tailor it to a particular need. In that same spirit, when a member of the community enhances or changes the kernel program, they share it again so that it can be used, modified, and developed by others. Through this collaborative and iterative process, a more complete, inclusive, and thoughtful program is created.

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[3] Roy Ascott, "Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?" *Art Journal* 49, no. 3 (1990): 243.

The connections between self, perception, and the collaborative possibilities of technology lead me to wonder what might occur if a process like open-source was applied to identity. In other words, if an identity could be treated as "kernel," what might that person become when shared openly with a community? In 2011, this line of inquiry lead me to create YouAreMe.net, which has laid the groundwork for my creative research over the last six years. YouAreMe.net is an interactive online artwork in which I invite others to use my data and online identity as tangible material to manipulate, develop, and even destroy. I did this by publishing all of the usernames and passwords to my online social media accounts, as well as providing contexts for how others might interact with my identity. Visitors were prompted to write biographical texts based on images of me, to tweet as me, to get me more friends on Facebook, to digitally alter my images in Photoshop, to take over my avatar in Second Life, to email as me, etc. (Figure 10.1)
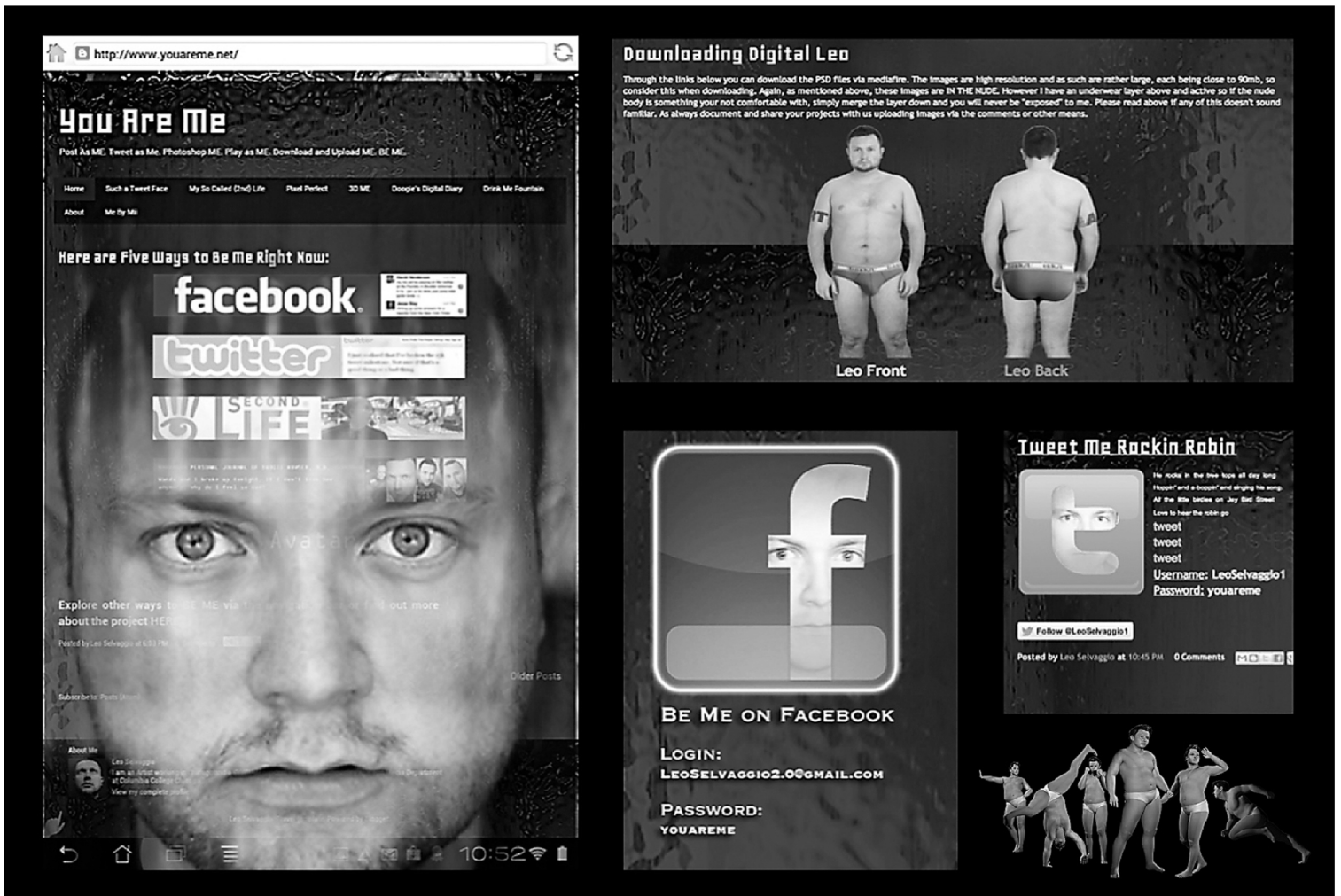

Figure 10.1 Untitled Digital Compilation of YouAreMe.net Screenshots, captured in April, 2011, Chicago IL

While initially concerned with the collaborative capacity of self-representation on digital platforms like social media, the work eventually became entangled with political aspects of digital identity, such as our relationship to personal data. I wanted to examine what exactly others would do with open access to my digital self. I was interested not only in the tension between public and private information, but also in the performance of carefully curated online identities. How do social technologies like Facebook shape the way we present ourselves, and how do we go about editing the realities of our lives for online consumption? And if we create or recreate ourselves through our technologies, how can we activate those identities and use these digital platforms to leverage systems of power?

YouAreMe.net had various results. One participant used my Twitter account to publicly denounce the University Illinois after it rescinded the tenured appointment of professor Steven Salaita. (See Figure 10.2) Another visitor flirted with one of my "friends" on Facebook, leading me to a very awkward conversation. Oddly, the most significant occurrence happened offline. I was discussing hairstyles with a friend when they very assertively stated that they would like to see me with a mohawk. Though "IRL" or "in real life" performance was not an intended part of the project, I decided to pursue the suggestion, despite being concerned about how I might be perceived in the workplace. Through that experience, I learned something about myself that I wouldn't have otherwise. I would have never chosen to get a mohawk on my own, and yet it has become one of the best expressions of my self, and one of the best examples of distributed authorship and the reciprocal relationship between self and perception, to this day. Another person turned their perception into an action, and that action became part of my self image.

Through YouAreMe.net, I built a conceptual framework that establishes my identity as a material with the potential to become something other than a self-referential image. In every example produced by the project, "Leo Selvaggio" became a container or conduit for some external purpose other than presenting myself outwardly to the world. In other words, YouAreMe.net asserts that my identity, and thus any identity, is capable of being a technology.

I spent the next several years, from 2011 to 2014, parsing through what this could mean and developing this framework through experiments and artworks. In early 2014, I returned to my initial question and the relationship between seeing and being seen, which lead me to an examination of surveillance culture. Specifically, I was drawn to the use of facial recognition technology in large surveillance systems like Chicago's Virtual Shield, because the face is arguably the most recognizable aspect of an individual's identity. Oddly enough, another word for "face" is "visage," from the Latin "videre" – "to see." Surveillance provided me a context in which to use my identity as a technology for socially-engaged political action against an over-reaching and unjust governmental practice.

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Best part of #FUSE10years was meeting Leo Selvaggio. #urmemask #surveillance #iamu #weareleo

LIKES
3

Leonardo M. Selvaggio
June 14, 2015 ·

I like me. Me is great. There should be more me, than just me!

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ➤ Share

👍 Leonardo M. Selvaggio and Paul Barrett

Leonardo M. Selvaggio Oh yeah! You´re right!
June 14, 2015 at 6:03pm · Like · 👍 1

Leonardo M. Selvaggio I totally agree!
June 14, 2015 at 6:03pm · Like · 👍 1

Leonardo M. Selvaggio Your words are my words..
June 14, 2015 at 6:04pm · Like · 👍 1

Leonardo M. Selvaggio Me 4 president!
June 14, 2015 at 6:04pm · Like · 👍 1

Paul Barrett Thought I logged in to Twitter for a sec.
June 14, 2015 at 6:13pm · Unlike · 👍 1

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 18 Sep 2014
why is @buberzionist harassing everyone on the #salaita #SupportSalaita feeds? that's what he does.

▶

Why is @buberzionist harassing me? (with tweets) · ...
Is a social media user named "Buber Zionist" an unwelcome presence in your social media life? Read this guide for information about how to deal with this abu...
storify.com

↩ 3   ⇄ 4   ♥ 2

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 12 May 2014
I am You! :D

↩   ⇄   ♥

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 10 May 2014
#NetNeutrality

↩ 1   ⇄   ♥ 1

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 10 May 2014
Well hello there, friends!

↩   ⇄   ♥

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 9 May 2014
I feel like such a creeper. excellent!

↩   ⇄   ♥

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 21 Sep 2015
This #youareme-project is really creepy.

↩   ⇄   ♥

Dave Borghuis @daveborghuis · Jan 20
Bij @TETEMkunst expositie "Homage to Nervous Systems" over #privacy #facerecognition en meer, vanaf 13:00 tot 17:00 hier inloop @PrivacyCafe

📌 Save   Translate from Dutch

Leo Selvaggio @LeoSelvaggio1 · 18 Sep 2014
I can't believe no one's changed the password or something.

↩   ⇄   ♥

Figure 10.2 Untitled Digital Compilation of Various Twitter and Facebook Feeds, all digitally captured on April 16th, 2017

At this point, it would be worth explaining how facial recognition works and my approach toward jamming such a technology. Facial recognition is an image-based algorithmic approach in which a system compares the image it obtains from a surveillance camera with a reference image it has stored in a database. It does this through a process called feature detection, wherein it analyzes the relationships between facial features, such as the distance and proportional scale between eyes, cheeks, lips, chin, etc. When the system determines a match, it can then attribute the data attached to the reference image (such as name, gender, race, etc.) to the face in the surveillance video or image.

Rather than trying to disrupt the image-gathering or facial recognition functions of surveillance systems, I decided to embrace the working model of facial recognition so that I could subvert that design. All design makes some assumptions about the user, interface, and environment, and those assumptions can often be exploited. Taking a cybernetic approach, I began to ask what lends the facial recognition process the authority to identify an individual on camera. If I accept that facial recognition matches faces in camera-based documentation reliably with faces in image databases, then what, if any, assumptions are made that enable this technology to be statistically valid and accurate? The answer to this question is that facial recognition systems make the assumption that faces are inherently reliable indicators of individual identity.

While this is a logical conclusion, my current ongoing work, URME Surveillance, operates by asking, "What if that assumption were false? What if faces were not reliable indicators of individual identity?" The word "face" is related to the Latin "facere," meaning "to make or do." It became apparent that my goal was not simply to understand the face as a way of seeing identity, but to activate the face as a site of resistance, and so I began to create the conditions in which the assumption that faces are reliable indicators of identity would be false.

Attacking this assumption provided me with a very simple solution: present the system with a face that was not connected to the identity of the body being surveilled. In May of 2014, I launched URME Surveillance, a project in which I invited participants to wear a photorealistic 3D printed prosthetic of my face in public spaces. This caused facial recognition systems to attribute the wearer's actions to me. By publishing my own face for public use, I enabled the wearer to subvert highly networked surveillance through the creation and proliferation of disinformation about the identity "Leo Selvaggio." (Figures 10.3 + 10.4)

Figure 10.3 Urme Surveillance Identity Prosthetic in 4 Views with Original Source Material, May, 2014, Chicago IL

Figure 10.4 Untitled Documentation of URME Surveillance Identity Prosthetic on Wabash Ave, May, 2014, Chicago IL

Through the URME Surveillance Identity Prosthetic, I was able to do two things. The first was to protect the wearer's identity from identification by facial recognition systems. The second, which is theoretical in nature, is that with the communal participation of wearers on a large enough scale, with enough "Leos" running around, we could collectively produce enough disinformation about "Leo Selvaggio" to call into question facial recognition systems' ability to accurately determine the true identity of a face captured in camera based documentation.

What I had not anticipated from working on URME Surveillance was the profound effect it would have on my internal identity. When asking others, specifically self-identified women and people of color, to put on a male-presenting prosthetic made of "white skin," I had to confront the entanglement between surveillance (seeing, being seen, and the self), the history of patriarchal power, and ultimately, my implication in both. What I discovered was that despite the fact that I identify as queer and Latino, because of my ability to "pass" as identities of privilege, my perceived identity had become my lived reality. Others have always afforded me all the privilege of a white, heteronormative, male identity, and so, despite my own self-identification, I am essentially that.

I would be remiss not to mention that reflecting on my adopted white hetero-normative privilege also set me down a different line of inquiry. URME Surveillance has proposed a conceptual framework in which privilege could be distributed or externalized though the use of prosthesis. While it is not within the scope of this chapter to explore the various implications of such a claim, I argue that by donning the prosthetic, the wearer is, in essence, performing white male hetero-normative privilege. In this way, my identity, the one created by others and internalized, has the ability and responsibility to become a technology for the benefit of others. I do not pretend to claim that the URME Surveillance Prosthetic is a panacea, nor that it necessarily accomplishes what I have just proposed, but if we can not see a future in which privilege is extinguished, then URME Surveillance, however fantastic, paints a dream in which that privilege might be accessed by anyone. This fantasy is the future my practice strives to realize.

Within the first month of its release, URME Surveillance went viral, and with it, my face and identity became a topic for countless blog readers, YouTube watchers, and Twitter users. In that first month, of the 150 or so mentions of either myself or URME Surveillance on the internet, I had been contacted only three times for an interview. The writers were crafting their own stories about me. To some, "Leo Selvaggio" was a freedom fighter. To others, "Leo Selvaggio" was an idiot. To some, I am egotistical; some have pointed out my work's similarities to BDSM because of the willingness with which I submit my identity. Over the last three years, my face has become a metaphor for privacy rights, criminal activity, and even beauty (or lack thereof.) What struck me most was how quickly my face was appropriated and assimilated for others' political use. In 2015, just a year after URME Surveillance launched, a friend sent me a link to a Google image search of the word "face." Mine was the 31st result, only two results behind that of President Barack Obama. (Figure 10.5)

I have pictures from all over the world of people wearing the paper version of my mask that they either downloaded for free from www.URMESurveillance.com or picked up at an exhibition, and I am a different person to each one of them. (Figure 10.6 + 10.2)

So: am I seen? The answer would have to be a resounding "no," at least not in the way I had originally asked it. Instead, I would say that we, Leo Selvaggio, are seen, and I can't wait to see who we become next – to see if the community of tens, hundreds, or thousands that wear my face will change this world for the better.

Figure 10.5 Untitled Google 'Face' Search Screenshot, captured on October 9th, 2015

Figure 10.6 Untitled Documentation of Art Souterrain, February, 2015

Bibliography

Ascott, Roy. "Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?" Art Journal 49, no. 3 (1990): 241-47.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London, Penguin Books, 1973.