

Leo Selvaggio Writing Sample Excerpts for URME Surveillance.

From: *Am I Seen: The Reciprocal Nature of Identity as Technology*, chapter contribution to *The Evolution of the Image: Political Action and the Digital Self*, 2017

“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.

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?”

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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 through 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.

From: *Surveillance, McLuhan, and the Social Prosthesis: Examining the Construction and Presentation of Identity*, short essay for Behind the Smart World Publication, 2016

In addition to protecting the wearer, URME Surveillance also subverts and confounds large systems of surveillance through the creation of dis- information, primarily through asserting the presence of my identity to surveillance systems in various areas of public space simultaneously. For example, if multiple users were to wear this prosthetic and become “Leos” in different areas of the same city at the same time, facial recognition systems would have conflicting locative information: the identity “Leo Selvaggio” would be inhabiting Main St, Carmen Blvd, Michigan Ave, and so on. Additionally, as the body of each individual wearer is different, there may also be inconsistent or contradictory data gathered about my height, weight, and gender. When done on a large enough scale, these conflicting data sets call into question facial recognition systems’ ability to accurately determine the true identity of any face captured in camera- based documentation. This subversion becomes all the more relevant as surveillance practices traditionally conducted by human beings are increasingly being turned over to automated systems under the false supposition that such systems are accurate and free of bias, which we will see is not the case.

URME Surveillance successfully corrupts digital surveillance networks through an analysis and exploitation of the way those systems function. Facial recognition technology, as it is applied for practical use, operates on the assumption that faces are unique and inherently tied to individual persons. This assumption of stability when collecting data on faces (and their respective identities) is what produces our confidence in statistics and lends that data enough credibility to be considered incriminating judiciary evidence. Rather than attempting to subvert this system through digital means, URME Surveillance takes an analogue approach, turning the system’s assumption of stability into a weakness by producing conflicting data sets in facial recognition databases.

Compared to several other digital interventions, such as Julian Oliver’s “No Network” piece, URME Surveillance is a relatively low-tech project. Though the URME Surveillance Identity Prosthetic is not a digital inter- face, its effect and execution are digital to some degree. Within the logic of URME Surveillance, one is either performing “Leo Selvaggio” or they are not. Functionally, URME Surveillance is similar to a computer virus. As each wearer becomes a part of the URME worm, “Leos” multiply and replicate, confounding data sets about the “Leo Selvaggio” identity. In this way, URME Surveillance engages and empowers the public as active collaborators and components of a larger network of human interaction

From: URME Surveillance: Performing Privilege in the Face of Automation, short paper for the International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media, 2016

I imagine a future where everyone wears my face, literally. Take a moment to consider this future. As you walk down the street to the subway, you pass by me over and over and over again. The sliding doors of the train open to a swarm of Leos. Some are tall lean elegant Leo's while others are short, chubby, athletic, skinny compact, or obese. All of them wear my face. A few are female, while some of the others are male. The majority are more difficult to identify as either. As you get on, your eye catches the reflective plastic window of the door. My face stares back at you. You almost forgot you put it on this morning. The train churns down the tracks and you realize that you haven't really thought much about it, what people really look like. After all, you look at Leos all day, every day. You get off at your stop and head for the exit. As you walk up the stairs to street-level you catch a glimpse of an old rusted box with a camera lens on it hanging from the wall. You have to remind yourself that it is called a surveillance camera, not that you know why you should bother remembering what they are called. They haven't been used in years.

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The URME prosthetic turns the weaknesses of these cameras into strengths. As mentioned above, the lower the resolution of the camera the higher a chance the prosthetic will pass undetected to a human watching a monitor because the edges appear to blend into the rest of the face; where as in higher resolution systems those edges may be more visible to the human eye due to the larger amount of visual information available. Thus there is a direct correlation between low image resolution cameras, of which most surveillance systems use, and the prosthetic's ability to "pass" as a real face on a set of surveillance monitors. In this way, the security officer or other human element will continue to track the prosthetic with conviction, believing that they are actually seeing the identity presented to them on camera, "Leo Selvaggio".

Furthermore, as URME's strategy is not to hide but rather substitute, it is simultaneously important that the camera recognize an identifiable face. The prosthetic is designed with all the same features that trigger facial recognition. In other words, the prosthetic works on two levels as a kind of recognition/misrecognition duality. The camera recognizes a face while the human does not recognize the face as a prosthetic.

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Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to properly survey the entanglement of racial and gender politics within surveillance practice, the most important conversation that URME Surveillance can contribute to, even more than the right to privacy, is discussion of white male privilege in public space. URME Surveillance asserts the utopian ideal that everyone could and should benefit from the same privilege that white men do, which is to simply be valued for being themselves despite their behavior.

The URME Surveillance Prosthetic, if undetected, allows for an individual to temporarily experience and consequently perform white male privilege in public space, while at the same time drawing attention to the very nature of privilege as a component of a patriarchal power structure that excludes the majority of Americans. It is not the goal of URME Surveillance to transform everyone into White men and as an artist, I reject that notion of milky homogenization. However, by engaging the idea that white male privilege could somehow be shared and distributed to others, then as a metaphor, URME Surveillance has the potential to become a platform to examine questions of race, class, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and expression, and other factors that circumscribe our freedoms in public space.

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Still, harkening back to texts like Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto", in which she describes a future free of gender binaries and other markers, I look forward to a day when we are all trying on each others' faces and identities (Haraway 1991). I imagine a world where there is a one-to-one ratio, with everyone having access to any prosthetic they want to wear that day, including their own. How do we resist surveillance? I am not completely certain, but I know it has to start with an "us". It is my hope that by beginning with "me", we can find our way towards a collective power that champions our undeniable human right to self-actualize and express the wonders of our identities.