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## Occhiolism and Coded Bodies: Current Social Challenges

**Abstract:** The debate between “performed” and “digital” or “embodied” and “disembodied” (Anne Harris) brings forth new challenges and discussions. We detect a new type of interaction as an aggregated repository of the absent/present body, a *mêlée* identity (Jean-Luc Nancy) subsequently charting aspects of the aesthetic and the social sphere. Yet, the awareness of “occhiolism”, characteristics of both the artist and the spectator, sheds a new light on the technological advancements and the new ways of actualization of performances (art-spectator) interactivity in and beyond exhibitions. The paper has as a case study a digital interactive art exhibition: *Occhio*, which was the result of the cultural-artistic grants received from the University of Babeş-Bolyai (Cluj-Napoca, March 2021).

**Keywords:** Embodied/ Disembodied; Occhiolism; Mind Expansion; Interactive Spectatorship; Technoetics.

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*occhiolism*

n. the awareness of the smallness of your perspective, by which you couldn't possibly draw any meaningful conclusions at all, about the world or the past or the complexities of culture, because although your life is an epic and unrepeatable anecdote, it still only has a sample size of one, and may end up being the control for a much wilder experiment happening in the next room. (*The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

What makes us human? How do we redefine personal space vs. public space, the interior and the exterior as aesthetic dimensions and the conventions of display and perception in the new reconfiguration of the social semiotics? I plead for “understanding visual images as embedded in the social world and only comprehensible when that embedding is taken into account.”<sup>2</sup> From the body as a “scene of display” and the “body as artifact” to the “body as a site of lived experience” and as a “site of embodied agency”<sup>3</sup> social and

artistic identity is constructed and exhibited through gestures, practices, rituals: voluntary and involuntary performances juxtaposing dominance, beauty and novelty.

These voluntary and involuntary performances, traces of the symbolic language, embodiment and identity construction prompt various questions. What is the meaning of performance and interactivity in the new context of social semiotics and technological advancement? And how is the context influencing this symbolic language? What is the function of the internal, interrelational and macro-relational dimensions in identity coding, both socially and artistically? What is the role of new/ social media and the digital culture generally in enhancing these types of relationships and how is novelty applying to the process of both creating and transferring meaning?

I approached this endeavor as both observer and researcher, addressing a dual challenge: the encounter with the exhibitions and the aesthetic and social questions they provoke, alongside a reflexive analysis of the installations' contextual frame and their reception within this particular setting.

The processes that take place in the social area, as well as their circumstances and the objective and subjective reactions they trigger off reflect identity and mold it at the same time. And though artistic products may be traced down to individuals and their creativity<sup>4</sup>, they are an intricate puzzle containing all the cultural and social layers embodied in a certain moment in time. And if we also include the public in this complex process with the consumption formulas, then the algorithm will multiply its results. The main characteristics of a certain group, its visible traits, form the *text*, the trend that is recognizable like a

convention. Some researchers correlate the act of consumption with that of cultural identity.

Artistic products can be traced to individual creators, yet they function as a complex puzzle that encodes layered cultural and social meanings at a given moment. Stuart Hall's encoding/ decoding framework shows how texts are produced with specific ideological codes and then read by audiences in varied ways – producing preferred, negotiated, or oppositional readings that mirror readers' social positions and experiences. John Fiske adds that consumption itself helps constitute meaning, as fans actively negotiate commodities, reinterpret them, and sometimes rewrite cultural products to fit their own identities and communities. When we place the public at the center of this process – through patterns, routines, and formulas of consumption – the flows of media, including algorithmically driven ones, amplify certain meanings while also broadening them. They enable niche communities, remix cultures, and participatory practices that blur the line between producer and consumer. The visible traits, styles, and preferences of a social group become textual cues that shape recognizable trends and conventions, circulating as cultural capital and signals of identity.

In this view, consumption is not a passive act; it is a site where identity formations are negotiated, stabilized, or contested as audiences layer their own meanings onto cultural products while producers respond to evolving consumer signals. As identity implies communication incorporating different levels, we can consider the transfer that takes place between one individual and the others, in a continuous

dialog of display and perception.<sup>5</sup> Whether it is a voluntary or an involuntary performance, the body also channels a discourse of power, representing a “site of embodied agency”<sup>6</sup> where social and artistic identity is constructed and exhibited through gestures, practices and rituals: “Both art and self-exist for humans as meanings, and there is significant overlap in the ways we understand them. Art is understood to be a mode of self-expression. We identify self as a subjective flow of internal thought and feeling. We link individual selves and art through the complex notion of creativity. However, the meanings of both art and self are currently in a state of flux.”<sup>7</sup>

Social and artistic identity aggregates the past and the future into a continuum present. They create the context of embodiment and performance of the identity providing the expression and the interpretation. Performance and entertainment share a common ground, though expected from different categories<sup>8</sup>, and gaining different levels of success and novelty.<sup>9</sup> The permuted identity of the iconic (static image) vs. symbolic (moving image) redefines the self at the intersection of display, perception and critique. The simultaneous and non-linear presence in the digital culture can be perceived as a new type of violence (understood as the perception of the ambivalent space, an aggregated repository of the absent/ present body, a *mêlée* identity (Jean-Luc Nancy) subsequently charting aspects of the aesthetic and the social sphere.

Thus, the performed narrative not only creates, but also deconstructs the world. And the public also re-constructs and de-constructs the presented reality, as they shape the macro-relational dimension.

There is a two-way influence: the *ideational* (*experiential and logical*) communication surfaces to the *interpersonal* level and reflects in the *textual* function, whereas the “textual” impels the individual to recreate the *ideational* (*experiential and logical*) layer.

After one year of pandemic, perspectives narrow and widen at the same time. We marvel at the fragility and vulnerability of humans, and at the same time long for larger spaces and wider prospects. We notice a symbolic and paradoxical absence/ occurrence of the human body related to the current social identity. Even where there is an absence (in social spaces) or an inflated presence of the body (in personal spaces), the identity questions that these two extremes bring forth are augmented by the complexity of the actual context and the challenge of finding a new identity as a point of fusion, as well as the dislocation of these two approaches. *Inside* and *outside* are progressively less coherent and the performance of identity at the ideational and interpersonal level increases the challenges and “the awareness of the smallness of our perspective”.

Identities are constructed through representations, and this process illuminates how the notions of inside and outside are signified within culture. Žižek (2000) and Massey (2005) offer complementary frameworks for understanding how subjective interpretation and social relations shape space and identity. Thus, a spatial theory that blends physical, lived, and perceived space, provides a framework to interpret Ascott’s technoetic concept, highlighting how space, perception, and ideology shape contemporary identity in an information-saturated culture (Ascott, 2000).

### Going Beyond the Limit of Perception – OCCHIO

The intriguing concept that linked the two projects in the OCCHIO exhibition is *occhiolism*, which refers to the minimization of the human perception in relation to the hugeness around us and to the unanswered questions lying in the back of our minds, consciously or unconsciously. Ironically, holding all these aspects in mind can expand it by default, even if the human perspective is small and the questions still remain unanswered. We were mesmerized by this concept and decided to invest it and use it as a phenomenological situation of perceiving the world from a single, limited vantage point – the observer's eye – where consciousness itself creates a tiny, subjective universe that shapes all meaning.

*Human MegaCosm* aims to create an atmosphere with the potential of triggering feelings and sensations that lack names, referring to the conceptual goal of the project. In what concerns the *human* component and the overlaid filter of what the body looks like inside and what exists beyond it, the interactive installation aims to show the invisible perspectives in which the participant is more than skin and flesh, therefore rendering the contour of the body as having three new identities (biological, energetic, cosmic) that come into the conscious for the time of the interaction, even if they represent an underlying layer of identity from birth to death and maybe even beyond life.

On a more specific and material note, what *Human MegaCosm* does with the help of technology (a projector, a Kinect motion-tracking device and a visual

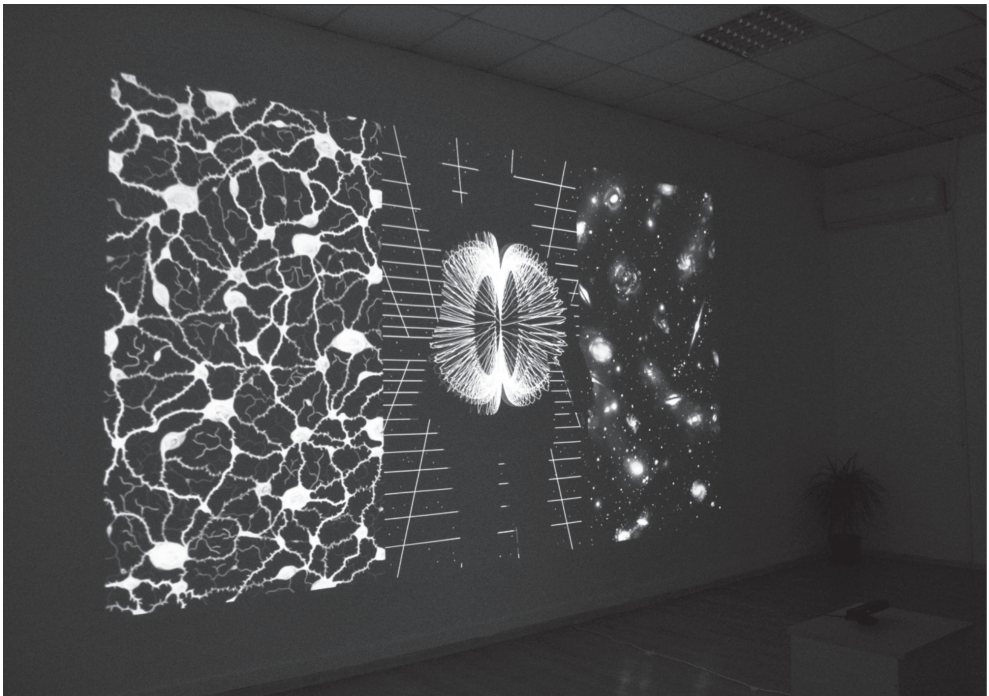
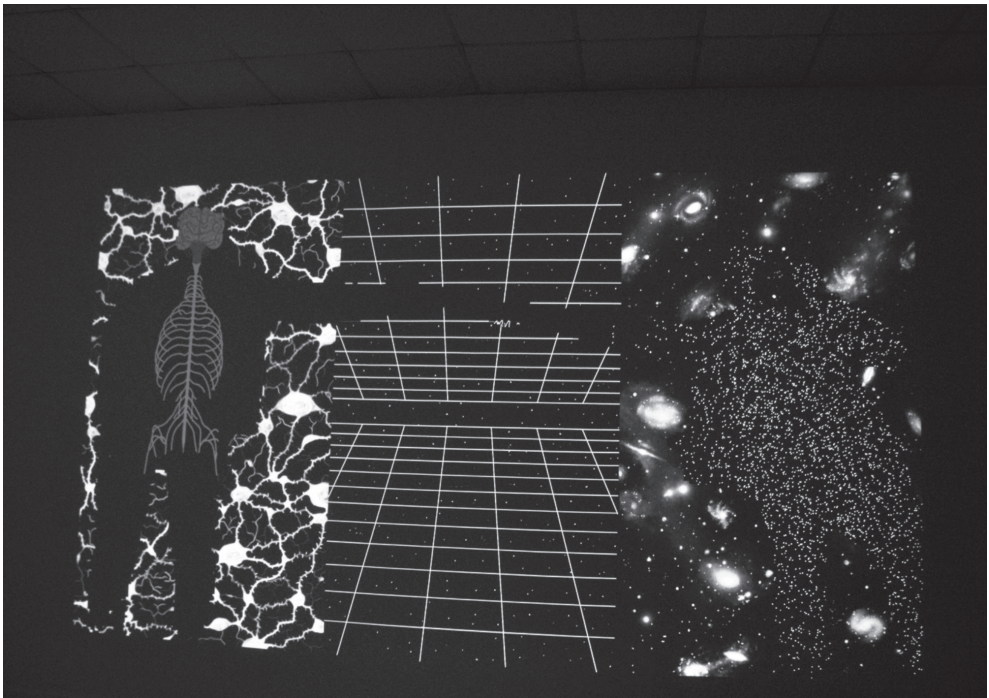
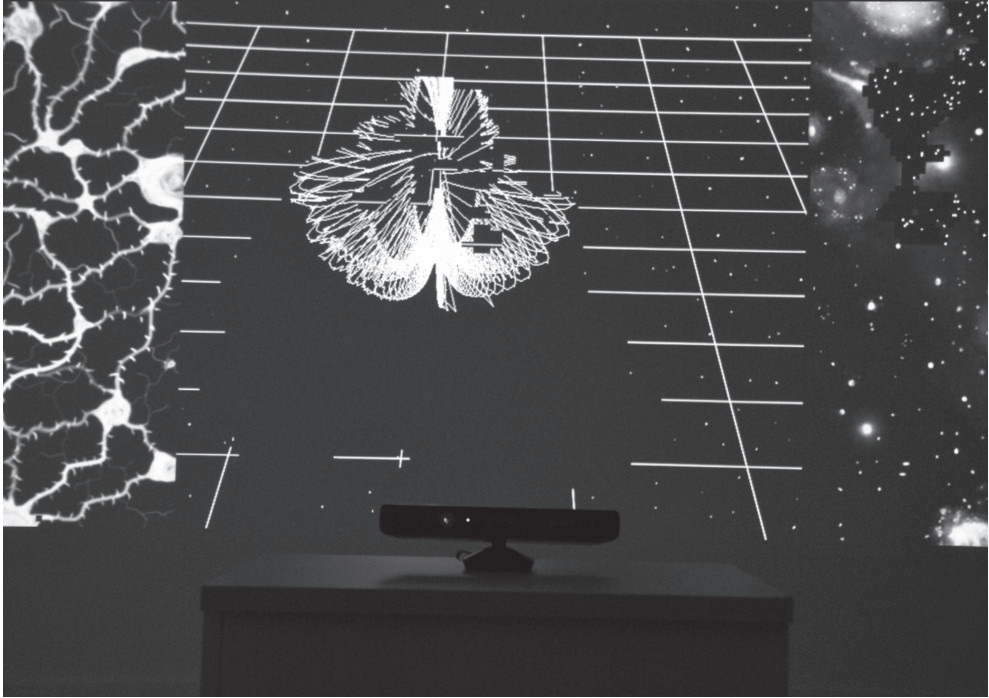


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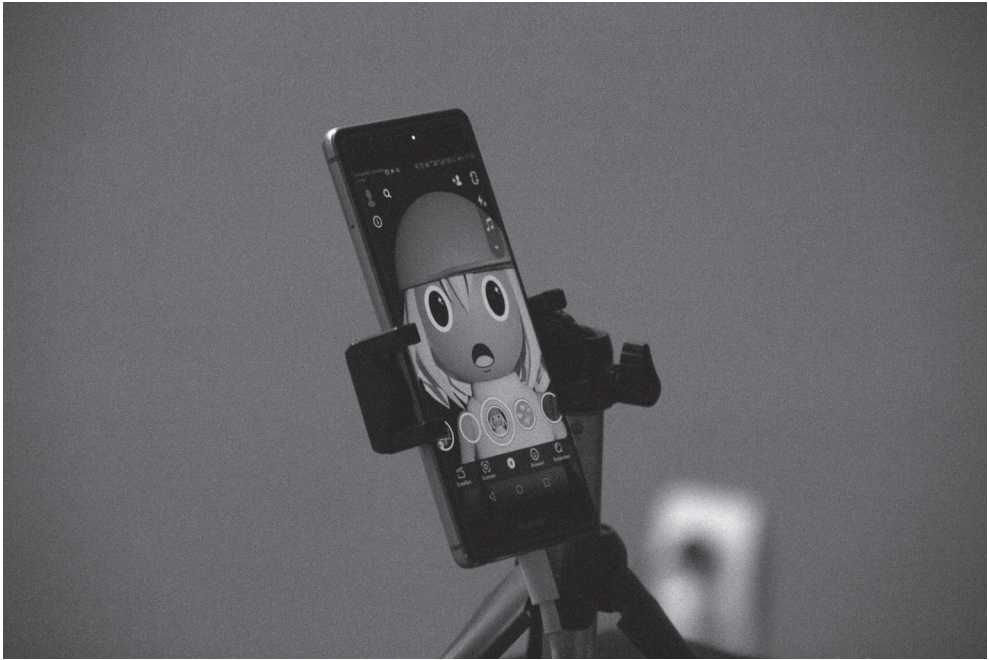


Photo credits: Andrei Boar, Alexandru Nagy

programming software) is to overlap the micro- and macro- aspects of the human body on the participants' projected silhouette, as a direct reflection of the complexity of their existence. Conceptually and visually, it consists of three projected parts with a specific theme – *biological, energetic, cosmic* – each being composed of a representing digital painting that „hides” a correspondent visual element with the aim of uncovering it through the spectators' presence and movement, resulting in them embodying the new identity that was revealed to them for the next moments of the interaction.

*Human MegaCosm* has the potential of standing as a sample of what visionary techno-art could mean to future participant-art interactions, by creating an immersive reflection that leads to possibilities for insights regarding the place of the human element

in the universe and the human as a perfect organic *machine*. Even using the word “machine” shows the extent to which technology has entered into the perception of life and of what sustains it, making it another layer from humans' puzzle of identities.

Virtual performers like *Moonz* could be a key step in the evolution of the post-human, as a virtual character's body and consciousness can in many ways manifest in our reality through technological advancements, compared to the limited possibilities of the human body and consciousness. In the arts, “to perform” is to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert. In everyday life, “to perform” is to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching. In the twenty-first century, people as never before lived by means of performance. Performances mark identities, bend

time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories.<sup>10</sup> In the context of computing, 'virtual' describes anything "not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so".<sup>11</sup> In the context of visual narrative, the definition phrased by Shields is probably the most relevant: he describes 'the virtual' as "a place, a space, a whole world of geographical objects and animated personae which populate fictional, ritual and digital domains as representatives of actual persons and things". With these clarifications in mind, a virtual performer can be defined as an animated persona, who puts on a show, a play, a dance, a concert to bring concepts and ideas to life.

*Moonz* as a virtual performer is set to be a collective identity through which spectators are able to embody the "feeling of coherence and ontological unity". Novak suggests that through cyberculture "distance in space-time is collapsing, and everything and everyone can enjoy an unparalleled, if disincarnate, proximity" and coins the word "pantopicon", which describes "the condition of being in all places at one time". The repercussion of a pantopicon state is, that the "self itself becomes subject to alteration". Identity could be multiple and distributed, with the sum not being a single entity, but a cluster of scattered information.<sup>12</sup>

***Human MegaCosm – Micro & Macro Levels of Occhiolism Within the Contour of the Human Body***  
(MARIA SCİNTEIANU)

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."  
(Arthur C. Clarke)

An intriguing perspective that got my attention and fascinated me is the

fact that people are creating and using more immersive means of escaping the consensus reality while also searching for new identities to experiment. Maybe because we are aware of what reality and our own systems of perception 'have to offer' and because we already experienced what is close and accessible to our senses, this curiosity is getting more and more prevalent. My focus is on this curiosity regarding something that would stimulate our senses and consciousness in newer ways, outside of the immediate reality and beyond our usual sense of identity.

I think this is a direction that evolves rapidly, having by its side the trigger of the constantly evolving technologies and mixed disciplines that give birth to novel concepts with innovative applications. We already have various means to extend reality or even create other new realities, from newer types of art and advanced research in the scientific field, to the use of psychedelics and the technology that starts to grow roots into every aspect of life. This results in a chain-reaction of interests that collide into each other and create newer and more complex concepts that shape the world-generated realities and ideas of self.

24 years ago, Roy Ascott coined a term that mirrors the above in a visionary way – *technoetics* – which refers to the complex intersection between art, technology and consciousness. As he defines it: „technoetic: *techne*<sup>13</sup> and *gnosis*<sup>14</sup> combined into a new knowledge of the world, a connective mind that is spawning new realities and new definitions of life and human identity.”<sup>15</sup> This comes in a context in which he already introduced another symbolic term – *cyberception* – which refers to "artificially enhanced interactions of

perception and cognition”<sup>16</sup>. He described then the materialized universe of our present by depicting both terms: “If we see the tools of mixed-reality technology as an extension of our own organic systems of perception and cognition (together constituting an emergent faculty of cyberception) we can more readily understand the whole flow of events in this domain as primarily technoetic.”<sup>17</sup>

The above-mentioned *new knowledge of the world* can be observed in the experimental field of new media art, which uses technological means in order to create experiences, build environments and shape meanings that trigger new connections between ideas within individuals. Technology therefore becomes a new “tool” for art, linking the spectator with the novel artworks through interactivity.

“Our consciousness allows us the fuzzy edge on identity, hovering between inside and outside every kind of definition of what it is to be a human being that we might come up with. We are all interface. We are computer-mediated and computer-enhanced.”<sup>18</sup> By zooming out and taking a look in perspective to how intrusively and inescapably technology becomes part of many aspects of our lives, the immediately drawn conclusion is that soon our identities would be more visible in the *digital* consensus reality. As inevitable as this now seems, the question is how we are going to make use of this emerging direction.

New media art takes advantage of the wide range of possibilities in the virtual world and its “task of realizing possibilities”<sup>19</sup>, therefore providing both the medium and the tools for materializing ideas and concepts in such complex ways that the viewer becomes an “embodied

viewer”<sup>20</sup>. The “virtual dimension for corporeal experience” has the “potential for *embodied distribution as a condition of experience for information culture*”<sup>21</sup>. In *Occhio* exhibition’s case, information taken from the real world (the human body & the facial expressions) is processed and translated into either an avatar or a visualisation of elements, this conversion representing a superficial way of experiencing another identity that virtualizes outside of the real and the palpable, in a short escapist sphere of perception.

Regarding the identity of the human body in an interactive “escapist” space, Massumi relates it with the motion, resulting in a loss of identity: “When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation ... In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own ... potential to vary”<sup>22</sup>. The paradox of the body losing its visual identity in its movements and being overlapped with a new one at the same time represents now, in retrospective thinking, a subtle way of deconstructing the concepts that created the interactive experience.

### **Moonz – The Birth of a Virtual Star (ANNA DECHENG ZHU)**

“At its most utopian, the digital revolution opens up a new dematerialized, deauthored, and unmarketable reality of collective culture...”

(Claire Bishop<sup>23</sup>)

**W**hen observing the different ways virtual performers like Moonz, Gorillaz, Hatsune Miku or K/DA actualize and “come to life”, I can see a transmedia

approach. Following Pearson's<sup>24</sup> understanding of online identity as a staged form of self-presentation in digital environments and Dixon's<sup>25</sup> view that digital performance reshapes presence and embodiment through media technologies, virtual performers can be understood as carefully constructed forms of mediated identity. The virtual characters use different mediums and technology to build their characters and universes. As part of my research, I am classifying ways of actualization of virtual characters. There are many ways in which a virtual character can be built and "made real" in the real world. It can go from classic mediums like written text to animated content for holographic projections or live stream appearances, to reach embodiment through audience interaction. As technology matures and grows with exponential speed, the mediums of actualization expand at a fast pace. Digital platforms influence how identities are presented and how widely they can be seen.<sup>26</sup>

On the one hand, the content of performances (e.g., dance) is increasingly disembodied from the corporeality of the performers. The most experienced dancers still need to face the reality that their physical agility will decay after a "narrow window of dance opportunity". Inevitably, dancers need to become choreographers, leaving the performance to "other, younger bodies."<sup>27</sup> Kim, Kim and Kwak<sup>28</sup> proved with their classification of K-pop dance movements with motion capturing through Kinect motion sensors that it is possible to quantify these movements based on human skeleton motion data. As we can see from the examples of K/DA, the published dance choreographies<sup>29</sup> are completely detached – disembodied – from the real-life

performers and transferred on to the animated 3D bodies of the virtual group members. Here, just as Song and Li suggest, the avatar appearance functions as a performative interface, where costume, body form and visual design become key tools in constructing digital identity.<sup>30</sup> The choreographers and singers remain anonymous and replaceable. This leads us to the conclusion that the virtual bodies of K/DA can be seen as extensions of physically performing bodies, allowing virtual immortality through technological advancement.

On the other hand, social media led to an increase in identity performance. In general, identity performance can affirm, conform and strengthen individual or group identities, also referred to as the identity consolidation function.<sup>31</sup> It can take various forms of expression such as physically manipulating your appearance, verbal expression of representations and attitudes or general purposeful expression or suppression of behaviours. Fans connect to their idols by creating their own performances and interpretations of the creative work and upload them to social media, entering a new sphere of interactive spectatorship, by documenting, archiving and displaying parts of themselves through their presentation on social media.<sup>32</sup> Kaplan suggests that social media environments turn performance into a relational process, in which identity develops through interaction rather than simply being displayed, similarly to how people adjust their identities in face-to-face social situations.<sup>33</sup> The spectator becomes an extension of the virtual characters, "through images, videos, status updates, profiles, friend lists, visible conversations, tastes and interests, and comments that appear within their profile,

social media participants present a highly curated version of themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary mainstream media productions can be seen as collaborative productions, as behind the stage performers stand teams of choreographers, songwriters, producers and marketers, all working towards the final products. The almost manufactured development process of media productions makes virtual performers to be the embodiment of such, a predictable development - with the design, voice and choreography being created by 3 different artists and assembled to one final artistic product. The famous Japanese virtual idol Hatsune Miku can be seen as the perfect example of such collaborative virtual art creation, as the audience can simultaneously be her producers, by writing their own songs using Hatsune Miku’s artificial voice from Vocaloid<sup>35</sup> – a singing voice software. Through their participation, the audience themselves can then “experience a part of that celebrity feel.”<sup>36</sup>

During the exhibition of *Moonz*, the interactive augmented reality filter captured the spectators’ attention, in which the latter performed as the virtual character themselves alongside its holographic projection. As part of the bigger brand of *Moonz*, the interactive approach of character creation will be extended to more characters within the same *Moonz* universe. The interactive spectatorship will be continued through augmented reality filters and virtual reality worlds. Additionally, the transmedia actualization of the virtual performers will be extended through collaborations in which the spectator community becomes a crucial part of the creation itself - both in the selection of voices for the virtual performers as well as in the writing of the characters themselves. A phenomenon

often seen in mainstream pop-culture is the creation of fan-lore through written text or comics. “Lore” originates from the word “folklore” and describes “the characters, locations, and objects within a universe and the information regarding their history, locality, and functionality.” As part of the *Moonz* concept, the community will be encouraged to participate in the lore-creation of the virtual performers. The spectators as part of the community will become an “ever-interconnected part of the whole” – a part of a “new civilization of mind” as stated by Yurtsever and Tasa.<sup>37</sup> While not designed as a formal experiment, the exhibition of *Moonz* worked as an exploratory digital performance setting in which embodiment was shared between interfaces and participants, supporting Dixon’s observation that interactivity becomes part of the performative event in digital contexts.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

After one year of very confusing and dense social experiences during the pandemic, the exhibition-event was offered as an intermission to meditate and experience the connection between micro- and macro-cosmos, between past and future. The audience entered a new dimension, the place of the exhibition served as a portal to a dual chronotope. One room could make you the protagonist of a channel between your body and three visualisations of the body, while the other room transformed you into an archetype of a virtual person. Both experiences constituted a dispensation from the actual order, revoking the current identity of the engaged viewer and participant and proposing a new status. These endeavors aggravated any possibility

to contextualize the experience outside the immersive dual chronotope, yet projecting the outside reality into a new one, conspicuous and tractable, seductive and experimental, overwhelming and rhythmic.

The exhibition challenged our fears and pettiness with occhiolism, creating an experiment that incited new horizons both in time and space, coding our bodies with virtual and energetic dimensions.

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3. Rosemary A. Joyce, "Archeology of the Body", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34, 2005, p. 139.
4. "Creativity is often the factor held to differentiate mere craft (technical facility) from art. In its lesser forms, creativity is associated with the concept of talent, and in its greater forms with that of genius. *Self-expression* is also incorporated into the linked symbolism of freedom and creativity", v. Deborah L. Smith-Shank (ed.), *Semiotics and Visual Culture: Sights, Signs, and Significance*, Reston, National Art Education Association, 2004, p. 133.
5. "Evidently these regimes of 'contingency, irony, solidarity' (to slightly mis-use the title of one of Richard Rorty's books) may not serve to 'locate' us in space and time, like auratic art, or ground us in an ontology of proof and evidence constructed around trace and imprint as the photographic

- image is said to have done, but it could nonetheless indicate the place for us in the new media, as bodies and minds, but also – and this will be the challenge – as participating subjects and (inter-) active citizens”, v. Koivunnen and Soderbergh Widding (eds.), *Cinema Studies into Visual Theory?* (D-Vision Yearbook, Vol. 1), Turku, University of Turku, 1998, p. 46.
6. Rosemary A. Joyce, “Archeology of the Body”, p. 139.
  7. Deborah L. Smith-Shank (ed.), *Semiotics and Visual Culture*, p. 132.
  8. “Anthropologists and programme-makers are communicators, whereas film-makers are artists. Anthropologists share with programme-makers the *compulsion to explain*; film-makers, on the other hand, share with programme-makers the *compulsion to entertain*,” v. Crawford and Turton, *Film as Ethnography*, Manchester, Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, 1992, p. 261.
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