VIRTUAL IDENTITIES
Exhibition Exploring the Concept of Identity in the Digital Age

Today digital technology and new forms of communication play an increasingly dominant role in society, prompting a rethink of the concept of identity which is under pressure as a result of the conflict between privacy and public access, between the right to personal freedom and the need for collective security. This theme of identity is explored in the exhibition *Virtual Identities* by the Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozzina (CCCS) at the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, from **20 May to 17 July 2011**. The exhibition has been organised by the CCCS, in consultation with Antonio Glessi (Dept of Media Design, ISIA, Florence), Roberto Simanowski (Institute for Media Studies, University of Basel), Christiane Feser (artist) and Franziska Nori (Director of the CCCS).

If the so-called 'networked society' is redefining the borders of our personal as well as our collective *persona*, shaping our habits and attitudes, desires and needs as well as our values, the online identity (or internet *persona*) becomes an extension of the physical self when establishing social relations on the internet. Our 'virtual' identity is constantly connected to automated systems which keep track of what we do, with whom we talk and where we are.

On the other hand, in the current communication-based society a person seems only to exist if they have an online presence and are involved in a constant flow of interaction. Web 2.0 has taken over everyday life, particularly for the younger generation for whom sharing thoughts, experiences and information with their peer group is an essential part of their identity. To twitter or to blog are established cultural practices which combine to remove the cloak of privacy.

Contrary to earlier theoretical studies, which found that assuming multiple personal identities in online communication platforms was generally positive with a potentially constructive and liberating effect on the person, today's web services have now developed to the point of actually identifying the user and their 'true' identity. Certainly since Facebook founder Marc Zuckerberg stated that in the contemporary world the private sphere is obsolete, a growing lack of attention by users in the managing of their online identity and personal data is evident. Whilst anonymity, user privacy and the protection of the private sphere have been an essential part of (online) life for many years, nowadays it seems to be less and less a concern.

However, the reputation that a person, institution or corporation earns in the public online sphere has become of major value, worthy of protection. The status and position of an online *persona* are defined through the data the user provides about themselves as well as by the feedback from the peer group ("I like"). Although the overlap of the virtual and the actual person does not necessarily need to correspond, today users do not seek to differentiate between their online and actual identities. When projected into the virtual world, mind, body and self all become consciously-manufactured constructs through which individuals interact with each other.

The artists taking part in the exhibition are: **Evan Baden** (USA), **Christopher Baker** (USA), **Natalie Bookchin** (USA), **Robbie Cooper** (UK), **etoy.CORPORATION** (Switzerland, **Nicholas Felton** (USA), **Les liens invisibles** (Italy), **Chris Oakley** (UK), **Sociable Media Group** (USA), and **Michael Wolf** (Germany/China).

In his series *Street View Paris*, photographer **Michael Wolf** takes the paradoxical relationship between art and digital technology to an extreme. Rather than taking photographs on the streets of the French capital, he simply dipped into material available on Google Street View. He captured random moments of city life that had an unexpected aesthetical beauty and demonstrated the relationship between the human being, the cityscape and the digital world.

The photographer **Evan Baden** captures the faces of youngsters totally immersed in digital communication. Their faces, alienating and almost absent, are only illuminated by the lights of the screens of the different tools they use to connect them to a virtual reality which seems to be more real than the physical world they inhabit. In his video *Immersion*, **Robbie Cooper** addresses the issue of the visual and emotional feedback between the individual and the digital world, dwelling on the strong emotions that appear on the faces of young and older children as they interact with a screen.

Analysing the theme of traceability and control afforded by new technologies, **Chris Oakley**'s video entitled *The Catalogue* is built around a video-monitoring system in a department store, in which the people filmed and defined by their personal and traceable data become transparent and, in a certain sense, vulnerable entities/identities. The traceability and visualisation of personal data also comprise the main focus of designer **Nicholas Felton**'s work, in which he creates diagrams and tables in an effort to meticulously record all of the actions and data, from the most humdrum to the most significant, that make up our daily lives.

The collective **etoy.CORPORATION**'s installation *Tamatar* is part of their *Mission Eternity* project which addresses the issues of identity and memory starting from the various traces that we leave behind in the course of our multiple interaction with the Web and reflecting on life beyond death, also in the digital world.

The group **Les liens invisibles** focuses on online projects which, with a hint of irony but always imbued with a strong sense of political activism, reflect on distortions and paradoxes in a person's relationship with the social networks. Their *Seppukoo* project allowed people to regain their own identities and their anonymity by 'killing off' their profiles on Facebook and was so successful that Facebook took legal action to stop the project.

The **Sociable Media Group** from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston (MIT) presents *Metropath(ologies)*, an interactive multimedia installation which allows people, by simply keying in their name, to walk through a three-dimensional environment visualizing all the information available regarding themselves, thus highlighting the individual's transparency and visibility on the internet.

In connection with the theme of participatory online communication, the video-installation entitled *Hello World! or: How I Learned to Stop Listening and Love the Noise* by **Christopher Baker** displays a wall of videos from YouTube, in which individuals address a global public from their private home. The hundreds of voices merge into a babble of background noise.

Natalie Bookchin's work *Mass Ornament* explores further the theme of individual transparency and accreditation. The work creates a choreography of movement through the merger of several different videos that various people have put on YouTube, showing them dancing alone in their private rooms but in front of the eye of a webcam.

The exhibition also includes a project by the Iranian photographer **Diana Djeddi** that reconstructs the case of Neda Soltan-Agha, a young student killed during the demonstrations in Tehran in 2009, giving an example of the power but also of potential risks involved in the dissemination of information on the web. This episode became widely known through social networks but has given rise to a case of mistaken identity with an Iranian girl of similar name and appearance, Neda Soltani, whose Facebook profile photo became an icon of the revolution despite her lack of involvement, forcing her to leave the country for fear of retaliation.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue in Italian and English published by Silvana Editoriale in which all the art works will be documented, along with essays by Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology, MIT, Boston, and Michael Wesch, Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Kansas State University, as well as Antonio Glessi, Roberto Simanowski, Christiane Feser and Franziska Nori. The project will also be accompanied by a lecture programme to stimulate an interdisciplinary debate on the topics addressed by the show.

The project organisers are grateful for the support of

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Location:	Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozzina (CCCS) Palazzo Strozzi, 50123 Firenze, Italy
Opening hours:	Tuesday to Sunday, 10.00 to 20.00; Thursday 10.00 to 23.00; Monday closed
Admission:	(ticket valid one month): €5.00 full price; €4.00 concessions (university students and other concessions); €3.00 schools; Thursday, admission free from 18.00 to 23.00
Information:	Tel. +39 055 2645155 www.strozzina.org, www.palazzostrozzi.org

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