Multiple Gender Expressions:
Identity and Representation
in Digital and Physical Realm

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Abstract

The essay aims to explore the fluid and non-binary forms of body representation, self-image making and gender identities that are expressed through dress in digital culture. In fact, the use of fashion products makes the cultural system explicit and socially active through the construction of universes of values and everyday practices that help define individual identity as "belonging" to a complex system of cultural micro-worlds whose variety has a systemic impact on the conception and acceptance of the infinite possibilities of gender. Digital culture poses additional layers of complexity, proposing new norms and counter-norms that act in the sphere of influence between fashion and culture, altering, expanding and influencing the way fashion can be produced, remembered, communicated and known. In this framework, it is interesting to address the case of Ambrosia (Vincenzo D'Ambrosio, born in 1993), a performer and artist of the contemporary Italian scene, linked to fashion. Ambrosia seeks to intercept the now increasingly fluid and nonbinary forms of body representation, also tracing the historical roots of the Italian queer scene.

Keywords: Gender Identity; Digital; Performance; Gender-blender; Self-image Making.

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Self-image Making in Digital Ecosystems

The intense digitization process of recent years has such a transformative power to influence many human social, cultural, and communicative aspects,[1] thus also intervening in the phenomena in and around fashion. Mediated fashion[2] evolves so rapidly to shape an interdependent and complementary relationship between the physical and the digital, "pointing to the significance of this process in practices of the self".
Since digital ecosystems absorb the entire system of social relations, contexts, and human activities, they become pivotal in constructing social reality. This brings a hybrid dimension which, on the one hand, offers the possibility of portraying online identities differently from offline ones; on the other it allows to engage creatively in the definition of one's sense of identity[3] and the broader cultural practice of selfhood[4] which then, in turn, also intervenes on the sphere of reality, making physical and digital profoundly intertwined. While users may not be physically present in digital spaces, their virtual presence takes on a different kind of materiality embodied in images or characters, fostering the self as continuously negotiated, performed and mediated subject,[5] both in the physical and in the digital realm.

Thus, the representation of the self in the world is made explicit through garments in a performative act on the body in the social context. Nevertheless, digital can disrupt existing hierarchies based on aspects of identity like gender,[6] fostering views of the self as multiple[7] and gender as constructed.[8] Using Judith Butler's work on performative identities, the contribution aims to explore how, in digital spaces, gender identities are placed and contextually escape in the contemporary representation of subjectivities and individualities. In particular, if the clothes we wear make a statement,[9] the construction of identity can be understood in all respects as a performative act, closely linked to the cultural and social sphere,[10] allowing us to understand how fashion is "Highly effective in endlessly constituting but never fixing identities."[11]
In support of this reflection, two case studies are proposed in which digital technology actively intervenes in the construction of online gender identity: The case of Ambrosia (Vincenzo D'Ambrosio, born in 1993), Italian performer and artist, and digital paradigm offered by video games. Those cases help understand how, through digital media, a person can build and execute the gender identity that best suits in given circumstances and how this achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body in the physical world.
Identity is therefore to be understood as a way of conceptualizing the self in the context of representation.[12] In fact, the use of fashion products makes the cultural system explicit and socially active through

1.   Lev Manovich, "What is new media," *The language of new media*, 6 (2001): 1–15.

2.   Agnès Rocamora, "Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion," *Fashion Theory*, 21.5 (2017): 505–522.

3.   Rob Cover, "Competing contestations of the norm: emerging sexualities and digital identities," *Continuum*, 33.5 (2019): 602–613.

4.   Rob Cover, "Performing and undoing identity online: Social networking, identity theories and the incompatibility of online profiles and friendship regimes," *Convergence*, 18.2 (2012): 177–193.

5.   Katie Warfield, "Digital Subjectivities and Selfies: The Model, the Self-Conscious Thespian, and the #Realme," *International Journal of the Image*, 6.2 (2015).

6.   Niels Van Doorn, "Digital spaces, material traces: How matter comes to matter in online performances of gender, sexuality and embodiment," *Media, Culture & Society*, 33.4 (2011): 531–547.

7.   Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995).

8.   In this concern, see: Amy S. Bruckman, "Gender swapping on the Internet," in *High noon on the electronic frontier: Conceptual issues in cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT press, 1996), 317–326; Brenda Danet, "Text as mask: gender, play and performance," *Cybersociety*, 2 (1998): 129–158; Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

9.   Fred Davis, *Fashion, culture, and identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

10.   Judith Butler, *Undoing gender* (London: Routledge, 2004); Judith Butler, "Gender as performance," in *A critical sense* (London: Routledge, 2013), 109–125.

11.   Hilary Fawcett and Cheryl Buckley, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siele to the Present* (London: IB Tauris, 2002), 114.

12.   Rob Cover, *Digital identities: Creating and communicating the online self* (New York: Academic Press, 2015).

the construction of universes of values and daily practices which contribute to defining individual identity as "belonging" to a complex system of cultural micro-worlds whose variety has systemic repercussions on the conception and acceptance of the endless possibilities of gender.

Digital culture poses further levels of complexity, proposing new rules and counter-rules that act on taxonomies to define the kaleidoscope of gender identities. If therefore, on the one hand, we are witnessing "a proliferation of identity labels, norms, practices, desires, genders and subjectivities"[13] which offer a new range of terms "that might 'catch' those who fell through the gaps of liveability and identity consistency";[14] on the other hand, the openings offered by digital make it possible to develop a greater 'fit' with possible disjuncture from normativity in the practice of gender and selfhood.

The close link that is consolidated between physical and digital reality can be more easily grasped if we move away from understanding 'virtual' as a term exclusively referred to cyberspace (and thus as something illusory that differs radically from physical reality) to embrace the term in its original meaning, i.e. as something "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract,"[15] in other words as a 'plane of immanence', as a site of generative potentiality that is delineated through actualizations in daily life.[16]

Fashion practices thus are being shaped by and for digital media, with a hybrid result that affects the tangible reality of everyday life by rightfully entering the identity discourse. It thus emerges that what happens in digital spaces leaves material traces, having repercussions on self-image making, identities and gender performance. Therefore, on the one hand, the digital world deals with the themes of reality by producing dematerialized identities; on the other, reality feeds on the new values and new practices conveyed by digital in a relationship of reciprocal nourishment.

Ambrosia: Performing Themselves

In the contemporary Italian panorama of fluid and non-binary forms of representation of the body, self-image making and gender identities, an interesting figure is Ambrosia, who describes herself as a transgender artist and performer. As Marta V. Vicente writes:

> by examining the narratives that trans individuals have produced throughout history, we can state, at the very least, that transgender is one of the multiple identities that can define an individual. Furthermore, 'trans' itself is the result of multiple identities that, in 20th century Western societies, may include 'transvestite' and 'transsexual'. To choose one over the other would be as anachronistic as the term identity itself.[17]

Ambrosia had some media success in Italy in recent years thanks to collaborations with *Vogue Italia* magazine, the Milanese brand The Attico and above all her recent appearance on the RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana) television programme Stefano De Martino's Bar Stella, where she plays a cashier who dreams of being a showgirl. Ambrosia tries to intercept the now increasingly fluid and non-binary forms of body representation. She herself declares on her Instagram profile:

> It has been written in some newspapers that the character of Ambrosia was the result of the interpretation of 'a Neapolitan artist named Vincenzo', using an anagraphic name by which hardly anyone calls me anymore. 'Ambrosia' is what I decided to be long ago and it is not an invented name, a role or a mask, but the result of the woman I am today. I find it progressive that transgender figures like mine can be used on television as people and not as

13. Cover, "Competing contestations of the norm: emerging sexualities and digital identities," 602–613.

14. Cover, "Competing contestations of the norm: emerging sexualities and digital identities".

15. Marcel Proust as cited in Rob Shields, *The virtual* (London: Routledge, 2005), 25.

16. Gilles Deleuze, "Cinema 2: The Time-Image," *Continuum*, 28 (2005).

17. Marta V. Vicente, "Transgender: A Useful Category? Or, How the Historical Study of 'Transsexual' and 'Transvestite' Can Help Us Rethink 'Transgender' as a Category," *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 8.4 (2021): 426–442.

gender categories.[18]

In the history of the representation of the body and its component linked to gender identity, in Italy, the birth of the magazine *FUORI!* in 1971 represents perhaps one of the most significant moments. The magazine came out with its first issue in December '71 and has been on newsstands regularly since 1 June '72. Among the figures writing in the first issues was the 20-year-old Mario Mieli, a refined theorist of sexual liberation in Italy, who would publish the revised version of his degree thesis in 1977 with the title *Elementi di critica omosessuale*.[19] The figure of Mieli is seminal for understanding the Italian historical context related to the affirmation of gender identity. For Mieli, dressing as a woman does not mean re-presenting the 'objectified woman', because she is not a woman and the male fetishism imposed by capitalism would have him dressed quite differently, dressed as a male or 'unisex'. According to Mieli, it can be exciting for gays to wear stilettos or elaborate make-up; he also strongly criticises feminists who object to gays and transvestites in particular for their 'object-woman' clothes. For Mieli, they introduce a new moralism that he describes as the outdated anti-gay moralism, but stuffed with ideological feminism, which acts as a screen for the anti-homosexual taboo and fear of homosexuality. To the intention to reform, as Mieli says, a norm without eliminating it.[20] In Ambrosia's performance we can find the legacy of Mario Mieli's thought, for instance through the practice of cross-dressing: Mieli and his comrades experimented through performances with a mode of activism based on the theatricality of belonging, which sought to articulate and test the ethical-political claims of what he called 'revolutionary faggots'. The practice of cross-dressing represents for Mieli, as Roberto Filippello writes, a link between theory and practice, that is, between a theory of transsexuality and its possible application for the realisation of freedom within the horizon of a queer utopia.[21] However, care must be taken with the use of the word transsexuality because, as Marta V. Vicente also writes: "Although 'transgender' never completely replaced 'transsexual', the term 'transsexual' was progressively judged as reflecting a defective transgender identity. From this perspective, 'transsexual' was a term too closely associated with the body and the medicalisation of the trans body."[22] Ambrosia uses the medium of Instagram and social media as a field for artistic experimentation and the construction of her image, re-proposing cross-dressing practices[23] that can be traced back to Mieli's even though, in her case, the digital medium is a tool used above all for the self-promotion and sale of her own persona, an aspect that is very far removed from Mieli's certainly not linked to capitalist-consumerist logic. In this regard Ambrosia states:

> As much as we may want to hate reality, we come from an era where Instagram and social media are our calling card. Most of the work I've done is on social media, precisely because people see what I do on Instagram and call me... But I want to remind people to take care of their profile: not because I'm sick of blogging and social media, but because it helps to present yourself in a harmonious and clear way on social media today. It is our portfolio. Especially Instagram, I think as a matter of aesthetics, has become a new face for artists.[24]

In her interviews, Ambrosia states that she knows she is very hypocritical because most of the time she decides not to give a damn whether she is defined as a man or a woman, she does not feel the need to be placed, although she makes it clear that this does not apply to everyone. Ambrosia is aware of her

18.   Ambrosia (@vdambrosio), "Ho indugiato sulle parole da scrivere," Instagram, January 7, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CnHUH-fqS-N.

19.   Andrea Pini, *Quando eravamo froci* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2011), 64.

20.   Mario Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (Milano: Giacomo Feltrinelli Editore Milano, 2002), 202–203.

21.   Roberto Filippello, "On Sequins and Shit: The Epistemology of Radial Dress in Mario Mieli's Ttransexual Utopia," *Third Text*, 35.1 (2021): 130–144.

22.   Vicente, "Transgender: A Useful Category," 426–442.

23.   Alison Oram, "Cross-dressing and Transgender," in *Palgrave advances in the modern history of sexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 256–285.

24.   Riccardo Conte, "Scoprite la vostra femminilità e giocateci, intervista con Ambrosia," *Gay.it*, November 14, 2022, https://www.gay.it/scoprite-la-vostra-femminilita-e-giocateci-intervista-con-ambrosia.

androgyny,[25] she feels balanced between two poles, choosing to embrace both sexes. In this regard she further states:

> I know that I am Ambrosia and I know that I was born as Vincenzo, and I don't want to hide it. Whether you see what is real or true is not my problem.[26]

Ambrosia's character, somewhat like Mieli, through erotic-political practices attempts to traverse the prism of an aesthetic imagination aimed at deconstructing the 'civilised' epistemologies of the self/body that prevent human beings from thriving. In this perspective, it is interesting to speak of the ephemeral trace necessary to oppose mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the given. The ephemeral, as José E. Muñoz writes, is what often remains immersed in queer actions, stories and physical, communicative gestures such as, for example, the look of understanding in street cruising.[27] The ephemeral is omnipresent in Ambrosia's actions and projects, such as in her appearance in the music video for *Bagno a mezzanotte* by singer and Italian pop music icon Elodie, where her body and gestures are fused with those of the singer in a mixture of visual messages, which aim to break down the difference between a queer and heteronormative body, allowing for the recognition of a sensuality outside the norm. Judith Butler writes:

> If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do' gender alone. One is always 'doing' [it] with or for another, even if the other is imaginary.[28]

In this scenario, Ambrosia's collaboration with the brand The Attico is of particular interest. Ambrosia has repeatedly published photos of herself wearing the womenswear brand's clothes and accessories on her social channels, in fact making her fluid physicality available to the brand and its audience, thus communicating her image and her true self in the best possible way, thanks also to digital. Even outside the Italian context, there are some emblematic cases of the relationship that fashion brands are increasingly building with transgender figures, such as Arca, a musician of Venezuelan origin who defines herself as a 'Latin trans woman', who recently posed for the advertising campaigns of Bottega Veneta (Pre–Fall 2021) and Loewe Amazona (2021). Arca is particularly interested in experimenting with digital: her video clips are often made using 3D or a mixture of different digital techniques. Another international case related to the imagery of gender culture and the use of her own image in collaboration with fashion brands, is the musician, producer and trans icon Sophie, who was involved in the fashion show for the presentation of the spring/summer 2020 collection by Louis Vuitton's creative director for women's collections, Nicolas Ghesquière. In the setting of an elegant wooden set with a giant screen that projected Sophie's face as she sang the song *It's Okay To Cry*, her image looked like a giant avatar in an ethereal dimension. Interestingly, more and more fashion brands are trying to intercept the growing need of the Z generation to express its diversification in terms of ethics and gender,[29] which is becoming more and more fluid.[30] In this scenario, the creation of an avatar helps the user experience a more liquid virtual identity, expressing itself in infinite permutations. Brands play an important role through the creation of digital avatars that best assist their consumers and users in the representation of the virtual self. "There is an interesting connection between Gen Z and the metaverse," says Mike Proulx, vice

25. See Arka Chattopadhyay, "Androgyny in the Spectrum of Sexuality and Gender: Critical and Literary Possibilities," in *The Cult of The Androgyne: Reflections in Life and Literature, Art and Religion* (New Dehli: Authors Press, 2020.), 185–200.

26. See Chattopadhyay, "Androgyny in the Spectrum".

27. José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (Roma: Nero, 2022), 87.

28. Butler, *Undoing gender*; Butler, "Gender as performance".

29. Ellen Wynne, William Wright and Donna Alvermann, "Creating Gaps in Understanding: How Gen Z Disrupts Gender Norms on TikTok," *The International Journal of Critical Media Literacy*, 3.1 (2021): 1–23.

30. Tracy Francis and Fernanda Hoefel, "'True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies," McKinsey & Company (2018), https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies.

president and director of research at Forrester.[31] He points out that Gen Z is already the most racially and ethnically diverse and most gender fluid generation. According to Pew Research, the vision of the metaverse involves a user's avatar being present in different virtual worlds. Since avatars are personalized, one's virtual identity can be as fluid as the user desires, expressing itself in an infinite number of permutations. Brands can play an important role by offering tools for their avatars to help users best represent their true virtual selves.

Digital Identity Representation

Today's society is founded on the standardisation of beauty: size, gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, ability. Fashion for years has contributed to the formation of this collective imagination. In recent years, there has been a reversal: curvy models, those with vitiligo, and in general those with diversity have paraded the catwalks around the world, thanks to whom we have come to appreciate the myriad forms that beauty can take. This subversive and profoundly revolutionary incipit finds fertile ground in the infinite possibilities of the digital bodies, even if the non-correspondence between the physical and digital bodies generates ambiguity in virtual relationships.[32] Indeed, the digital brings with it and amplifies many of today's crucial questions in the real world, concerning issues of rights and identities, not least because navigating the digital means exploring environments where rules and norms are still being defined.
In digital ecosystems, the entire system of social relations, contexts and human activities is transferred, which in turn, although belonging to the immaterial digital dimension, have an impact on the corresponding real interactions. Although with different dynamics, in both dimensions there is a continuous assembling and reassembling of objects, bodies, materiality and meanings that strongly intervene on the forms of construction and rapport of the self. The synergy between the physical and the digital, between the different fields it intersects, also passes through the creative process and the design of identities, as well as other aspects such as technology. The digital simulation of clothing, developed to dress in-game characters, now becomes an operational tool for designing and prototyping.[33] Another synergetic aspect is the immersive experience on offer: experiencing at first hand the universe of meanings behind a collection, for example, being able to transform a set into a scenario and inspiration into a story, allows a product system to be perceived properly in its entirety.

Within this framework, we consider the multitude of possibilities available to materialise and benefit from the digital dimension. In fact, there are different levels of complexity, somehow related to the immersiveness of the experience, through which we can transport and communicate identity in the digital environment. To take advantage of a digital space, one first needs a name with which the user's activities will be associated: while this is the most elementary and widespread way to control and manage user traffic and interactions, it is also the first and simplest step to identify oneself in the digital dimension. In the ludic context of video games and the metaverse, as well as on social networks, this name can be fictional: a nickname consciously chosen to represent oneself, as in a new baptism. The digital identity, however, can have more evocative and detailed forms than the textual one of the nickname, ranging from the choice of clothing and style to that of a body different from the real one. In the physical dimension, the body is the only thing we really have and which represents us in the physicality of space, but we do not choose it. This gives rise to the need to decorate, modify and transform one's body: to adapt the aesthetic representation of one's inherited genetic make-up to the inner, psychological and social identity,

31. Maghan McDowell, "Digital people and virtual spaces invite unlimited options for self-expression. That also means that brands should explore representation more carefully," Vogue Business, September 28, 2021, https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/race-gender-and-representation-the-grey-area-of-the-metaverse.

32. Judith S. Donath, "Identity and deception in the virtual community," in *Communities in cyberspace*, eds. Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith (Routledge, London–New York 1999), 29–59.

33. Evridiki Papahristou and Nikolaos Bilalis, "Should the fashion industry confront the sustainability challenge with 3D prototyping technology," *International Journal of Sustainable Engineering*, 10.4–5 (2017): 207–214, https://doi.org/10.1080/19397038.2017.1348563.

which is consciously formed in the course of a life.[34] Human costume and clothing clearly show how in humans, unlike in animals, the variety and multiformity of dress is fundamental and always constitutes something invented, superimposed, mutable, in contrast to the perenniality, absence of any autonomy of animal clothing (turkeys' wattles, peacocks' feathers, etc.).[35] Considering today's sociological factors, in which identities are contextualised, this multiformity of human attire has even more reason to exist than in the past. Bauman attributes to modernity the characteristics of a liquid and to the individual a way of being in constant becoming: unlike the solid past, liquid modernity offers a perpetual state of freedom and uncertainty in which it is possible to adapt, change and reinvent yourself.[36]

In the digital dimension — disengaged from the system of physical, genetic and production laws of the physical dimension — the multifaceted and ever-changing representation of the self finds a flexible and constantly updated environment, but in particular an infinity of forms in which materialise.
Self-image making in the digital dimension presents two main possibilities: simulation, in which the representational aesthetic emulates reality —in games such as The Sims and Second Life,[37] avatars simulate human likenesses in real contexts with virtually unchanged social dynamics, the attraction for the gamer being the possibility of living a real life in the virtual, a substitute or at least parallel rebirth — and digital reverie, in which the representational aesthetic escapes the rules of reality:[38] both from a social point of view, because it evades the aesthetic canons of the real world, and from a physical point of view, because the realisation of one's own image makes use of the infinite expressive possibilities of the digital, freed from the law of gravity as well as from the canonical definitions of the physical dimension.
Furthermore, in the accuracy of self-representation, the duration and continuity of the digital experience are to be considered fundamental.[39] There are, in fact, transitory digital experiences, in which the use of a character is linked to a short period of time to be then, though not necessarily, changed; just as there are also longer and more lasting digital experiences, where the possibilities of personalisation are considerably greater precisely because an avatar will have to deal with a community to interface with, to which my image must ensure a certain stability and possibility of being recognised.

Digital self-image making thus depends on the real/digital aesthetic correspondence and the continuity of the digital experience, but also on the container that hosts our representation. In fact, the container that hosts the representation affects the possibilities of identification, offering different possibilities and complexities: from the filters of social networks, which allow us to modify, enrich and replace parts of the face and in some cases even of the real body filmed via webcam or smartphone; to the complete replacement of the real body in video games. According to a study conducted by Quantic Foundry in 2016,[40] Fantasy was successful among gamers because it was the video game genre that most of all offered freedom of style customization. Armour, hair, materials: every detail is chosen so that the user feels at one with his alter ego and the world he inhabits. Titles such as World of Warcraft, The Elder Scrolls and The Witcher: all those belong to the fantasy genre, and all those give a wide range of choice for the character's aesthetic characteristics. On the other hand, video games mobilise a market valued at $152 billion, according to an analysis by the specialised company Newzoo,[41] which had at least 2.4

34. Giorgio Casoni and Flaviano Celaschi, *Human Body Design. Corpo e progetto nell'economia della trasformatività* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2020).

35. Gillo Dorfles, *Mode & Modi* (Milano: Edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, 2010).

36. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernità liquida* (Roma–Bari: Laterza, 2000).

37. Rosa M. Martey and Mia Consalvo, "Performing the Looking-Glass Self: Avatar Appearance and Group Identity in Second Life," *Popular Communication*, 9.3 (2011): 165–180, https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2011.583830.

38. Fox D. Harrell and Chong-U Lim, "Reimagining the avatar dream: Modeling social identity in digital media," *Communications of the ACM*, 60.7 (2017): 50–61.

39. Christoph Klimmt, Dorothée Hefner and Peter Vorderer, "The Video Game Experience as 'True' Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players' Self-Perception," *Communication Theory*, 19.4 (2009): 351–373.

40. Nick Yee, *7 Things We Learned About Primary Gaming Motivations From Over 250,000 Gamers*, Quantic Foundry, December 15, 2016, https://quanticfoundry.com/2016/12/15/primary-motivations.

41. Newzoo, "The destination for gamers market insight," Report, June 19, 2019, https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/newzoo-global-games-market-report-2019-light-version.

billion people playing games in 2019. Practically a third of the world's population played a game on a console, PC, smartphone or tablet during that year. This data paints a different picture of the average gamer, who was historically identified with the male teenager and a sedentary and sometimes antisocial lifestyle,[42] and today's gamers range in age from 8 to 70, with no gender prevalence as well as a different digital involvement. Many of the gamers therefore were born and raised in the pre-digital era, while from generation Z onwards we can speak of digital natives, for whom involvement in the digital dimension is parallel to the physical one and equally tangible. A fact that lets us imagine how much in the future, when the generational change will ensure that humanity will be made up entirely of digital natives, reality will be permeated by the digital: this is why the digital dimension represents an important field of study, to analyse the dynamics of self-representation in environments where everything is possible. Adding legitimacy to this need is the interest of, for example, fashion companies, that, seeking to intercept new consumption patterns, mobilise a variety of resources to make their activities appealing and technologically innovative,[43] are recognizing video games as a form of cultural expression, based on certain skills comparable to those of a craftsman, including the ability to conceive new digital objects.[44] In this perspective, the development of next-generation video games and virtual environments is not just a matter of engineering skills and technical expertise, but an experience[45] increasingly immersive and social, whose interactions convey the dynamics of self-representation.

In the physical dimension, some designers have investigated the similar process by trying not to respect the structural constraints of the body, as in the case of Comme des Garçons' Body Meets Dress-Dress Meets Body Ensemble S/S 1997 collection. Stylist Rei Kawakubo says: "I realised that the clothes could be the body and the body could be the clothes", so through the skilful use of padding the designer modified the human silhouette with lumps and bumps, not at all friendly or charming. A disruptive concept of redesigning the body, which we also find in the S/S21 collection of Body Part Jewelry by Maison Schiaparelli. The surrealist-inspired creations break down the human body and recompose it in new combinations: earrings in the shape of nipples and noses, rows of teeth as necklaces, glasses in which eyes are drawn on the lenses and thimbles simulating long golden fingers.
It is easy to understand how this type of symbolic experimentation finds in the digital dimension and in Character Design the full freedom to create aesthetic and social personalities with which to identify, moving from the decoration of the body to its complete transformation. The choice is vast, forms that are at times far removed from the current conception of beauty, at times even far removed from the anthropomorphic structure, which for this very reason, however, find their raison d'être in the context in which they are 'worn'. There is the possibility of being the Hulk or a Pin-Up, but this is only one of the many nuances with which one can be represented: a seductive woman may choose to represent herself as a virile man, and vice versa, up to more extreme cases in which one completely loses the relationship with one's body, species, matter, dimensions: the human being, in the digital environment, renounces the awareness of being a living organism.

If, throughout history, mythology has created and assembled bodies with great freedom and imagination, allowing civilisations to naturally accept a great variety of shapes and proportions, the narration of non-binary, non-anthropomorphic and ageless characters in digital environments today represents a new mythology, capable, perhaps, of communicating to surfers the infinity of possible nuances a body can have. Let us take two borderline cases: Lightning Louis Vuitton and Bob Tekken. Like a model or an influencer, Lightning from Final Fantasy has such credibility and such a following that she was first hired by Prada in 2012 and then by Louis Vuitton in 2016. A strategy that allowed these two giants to associate their brand image with the audacity, loyalty and charm of this heroine. But the opposite is also

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42. Mike Molesworth and Rebecca D. Watkins, "Adult videogame consumption as individualised, episodic progress," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16.2 (2014), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1469540514528195?journalCode=joca#con1.

43. Mark Suchman, "Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches," *Academy of Management Review*, 20 (1995): 571–611, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0956522116302810#bbib0220.

44. Mary Flanagan, *Critical play: Radical game design* (Cambridge: MIT press, 2009).

45. Emma Westecott, "Independent game development as craft," *The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, 7.11 (2013): 78–91.

true: the exclusivity and imagery of a Maison can lend the right prestige to a character. This is the case of Louis Vuitton, which conceived the outfits for the protagonists of League of Legends on the occasion of the 2019 World Final Championship. These outfits are available in the game shop but not in reality, they are outfits that generate value without having to be associated with a real consideration. And it is the numbers that make it possible for an object to exist exclusively in digital. Suffice to say that the final with the Louis Vuitton skins was watched live by 100 million people and the Champions League final in the same year by 400 million. So, if, on the one hand, the digital world tackles the issues of reality by producing dematerialised identities, on the other hand, reality feeds on the new values and practices conveyed by the digital in a relationship of reciprocal self-feeding.

Material Traces of Digital Spaces

The reflection conducted in this discussion, accompanied by an overview of significant experiences investigating the gender-digital binomial, suggests the urgency of employing efforts in understanding the contemporary dynamics of self-representation, the construction of social identities, and the close connection with the languages and dynamics of Fashion.

The theme of the relationship between gender identity and digital environments, in fact, reveals its complexity precisely in relation to the extensive articulation that the two terms have assumed over time. In particular, gender is configured as a social construct, the representation of which is not always constructed coherently or consequently,[46] but it is endowed with a strongly performative character that manifests itself as something variable, relational, subject to processes of continuous transformation and thus reducing, creating or nurturing differences, in a continuous revision of socio-cultural patterns of reference.[47] The digital, on the other hand, increasingly presents itself as an environment to be inhabited, which is recognised not only as having the capacity to generate new and different aesthetics, project imaginaries and produce new meanings and values, but a central role in today's processes of socialisation. The physical and digital worlds are thus closely connected, in a relationship of interdependence in which, regarding issues of identity and gender, one dimension is able to feed into the reach of the other. Indeed, it is evident how "in light of growing digital cultural practices, new norms and counter-norms have emerged among younger people to describe gender, sexuality and relationships,"[48] producing a more expansive and specific taxonomy of labels, categories and ways of describing gender identities. It is certainly of interest to point out that in the recent *International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, 49 entries out of 260 are expressly dedicated to digital environments.

In this wake, the case of Ambrosia is significant in understanding how the construction and use of one's gender identity, in the digital space, becomes not only an identity and political tool but also a means of selling one's persona and consumer goods and/or services through it. While in the past Mario Mieli's cross-gender performances were political and unpopular, today Ambrosia's shows, who is an influencer, are not only quite successful with the public but even allow her to create business with her image, demonstrating the need of the younger generations to feel represented and to be able to identify themselves in broader and less normed patterns of recognition.[49]

Certainly, the fact that the mobility of media devices is combined with the diffused habit of staying connected, commuted personal and professional routines in a more complex socio-technological entangle-

46. Butler, *Undoing gender* (London: Routledge, 2004); Butler, "Gender as performance," in *A critical sense* (London: Routledge, 2013), 109–125.

47. Giuseppe Burgio, "Desideri sconfinati. Sessualità migranti e frontiere culturali," in *Gender/genere. Contro vecchie e nuove esclusioni*, eds. Margarethe Durst and Carla Roverselli (Pisa: ETS, 2015), 15–36; Paola Panarese, Stefania Parisi and Francesca Comunello, "Abitare gli spazi digitali: prospettive di genere su immaginari, estetiche e pratiche culturali in rete," *Mediascapes journal*, 18 (2021): 3–15.

48. Cover, *Digital identities*.

49. Rob Cover, "Micro-minorities: The emergence of new sexual subjectivities, categories and labels among sexually-diverse youth online," *Youth sexualities: Public feelings and contemporary cultural politics*, 1 (2018): 279–301.

ment with media.[50] But the digital environment actually erodes the boundaries between different social and informational spheres, and thus of social roles,[51] enabling the implementation of a more conscious design in the construction and representation of the self. In this erosion of boundaries, the digital redefines the geographies of social experience, making evident its profound impact on the dynamics of the physical world: "unlike the physical territories in which social interaction takes place, we are not faced with tangible walls and barriers but with 'permeable membranes' surrounding different social roles and activities."[52]

In the ludic context of video games and the metaverse, as well as on social networks, a nickname is consciously chosen to represent the self, as in a new baptism.

Furthermore, the role of the duration and continuity of the digital experience in the accuracy of self-representation is fundamental. There are, in fact, transitory digital experiences, in which the use of a character is linked to a short period of time to then be, though not necessarily, changed (Tekken match); just as there are also longer and more lasting digital experiences, where the possibilities of personalisation are considerably greater, since the avatar will have to deal with a community of users to interface with (Second Life, avatar, metaverse) and to whom the personal image must ensure a certain stability and possibility of being recognised. The places of socialisation offered by the digital world do not present themselves as neutral spaces, disconnected from human and social reality and extraneous to the impulses, conflicts and ferments that run through it; on the contrary, they become places in which to affirm, claim, reinforce or construct identities and subjectivities linked to gender. From the point of view of performativity, moreover, the digital allows us to experiment with a range of aesthetic possibilities that, by conveying the same message, can make use of a new expressive richness, also made up, for example, of the absence of physical laws and the lack of correspondence between the physical body and the digital body. This does not only apply to video games but also to photoshop, for example.

The very notion of the virtual should therefore be reconsidered in relation to everyday reality, since gender, sexuality and embodiment are represented in digital worlds through articulated strategies of visibility linked to specific identities and affiliations that communicate messages and convey values that affect our conception of materiality. Here too, in fact, the interaction between the physical and digital worlds produces a hybrid reality characterised by continuous processes of dematerialisation and materialisation that 'make possible a deep, dense and intense experience of products, extended in time and space, for which we can speak of augmented materiality or meta-materiality.'[53]

The digital will therefore open the door to infinite modes of representation with respect to the context in which to display the 'self' and to the affirmation of gender identity, transporting into the virtual world both the political self-representation of one's body and the commercial use of it in the complex and powerful cultural system of fashion.

50. André Jansson, "Mediatization as a framework for social design: For a better life with media," *Design and Culture*, 10.3 (2018): 233–252.

51. Nicola Pentecoste, "Goffman rewind: La presentazione del self nel quotidiano digitale," *Mediascapes journal*, 2 (2013): 106–118.

52. Pentecoste, "Goffman rewind," 107.

53. Eleonora Lupo, "Design e Cultural driven innovation," *i+ Diseño. Revista científico-académica internacional de innovación, investigación y desarrollo en Diseño*, 14 (2019): 120–132.

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