



*Proximities*

Nahed Mansour, Lee Nutbean and Giles Whitaker

June 18 - August 13, 2016

## Machinic Assemblages

Taien Ng-Chan

*There is a Buddhist question, simple and direct, yet profound, as Buddhist questions tend to be: Who am I? Ask yourself this question, listen for the answer...*

Did you hear it? A pause, a nothingness that occurs after the asking of this question, because there is no answer. Or, rather, the answer is the silence that reverberates after the asking. Or, there are many answers, crowding in all at once with multiplicities of selves composed of hyphens, networks, organic and inorganic material, experience and affect, location and context, each facet reflecting the “I” in a different way. It is, in fact, not the “or” that matters, but the “and” – as in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “and...and...and...”<sup>1</sup> that points the way towards multiplicities. This means that the self is not an essential thing; there is no core. There are many parts of each person, shifting and in motion.

Deleuze and Guattari use the term “assemblage” as a key concept of bodies as “constellations,” though as Jasbir Puar points out, the political possibilities of the term stem more from the original French term *agencement*, meaning “design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations—the focus being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns.”<sup>2</sup> The English translation leans more to activities of collection and combination, though in both languages, *assemblage* also refers to collage. These are all effective ways to think about identity, rather

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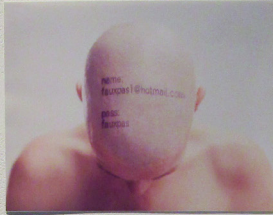
1 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.

2 Jasbir Puar, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics,” *Transveral* (2011): <http://ejcp.net/transveral/0811/puar/en>

than some core, essentialist idea of an “I.” Identity as assemblage is meant to undermine binaries (of man/woman, self/other, human/machine) by positing identity as collage, combination, collection, arrangement, relations. *Not* “either/or” but “and.” Multiplicity is key.

Within the exhibition *Proximities*, the artists point out how technologies affect the multiple identities that are assembled through popular culture, social media, entertainment and machines. For instance, social networking sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, LinkedIn, etc., provide virtual spaces where different identities are assembled for different audiences. Indeed, the presentation of a carefully constructed self is often the key element of some of these platforms. But what happens when others are invited to participate in this construction? In *Faux pas*, Lee Nutbean presents a virtual Facebook performance where anyone can log into his profile, free to add, edit, reconfigure and re-assemble. The results are amusing and disconcerting at the same time. Which parts are “real” and which parts have been edited or added to? Who is Lee Nutbean? Both a “false” identity and an ongoing interactive performance, *Faux pas* acts as an intervention into the world of social media self-presentation.

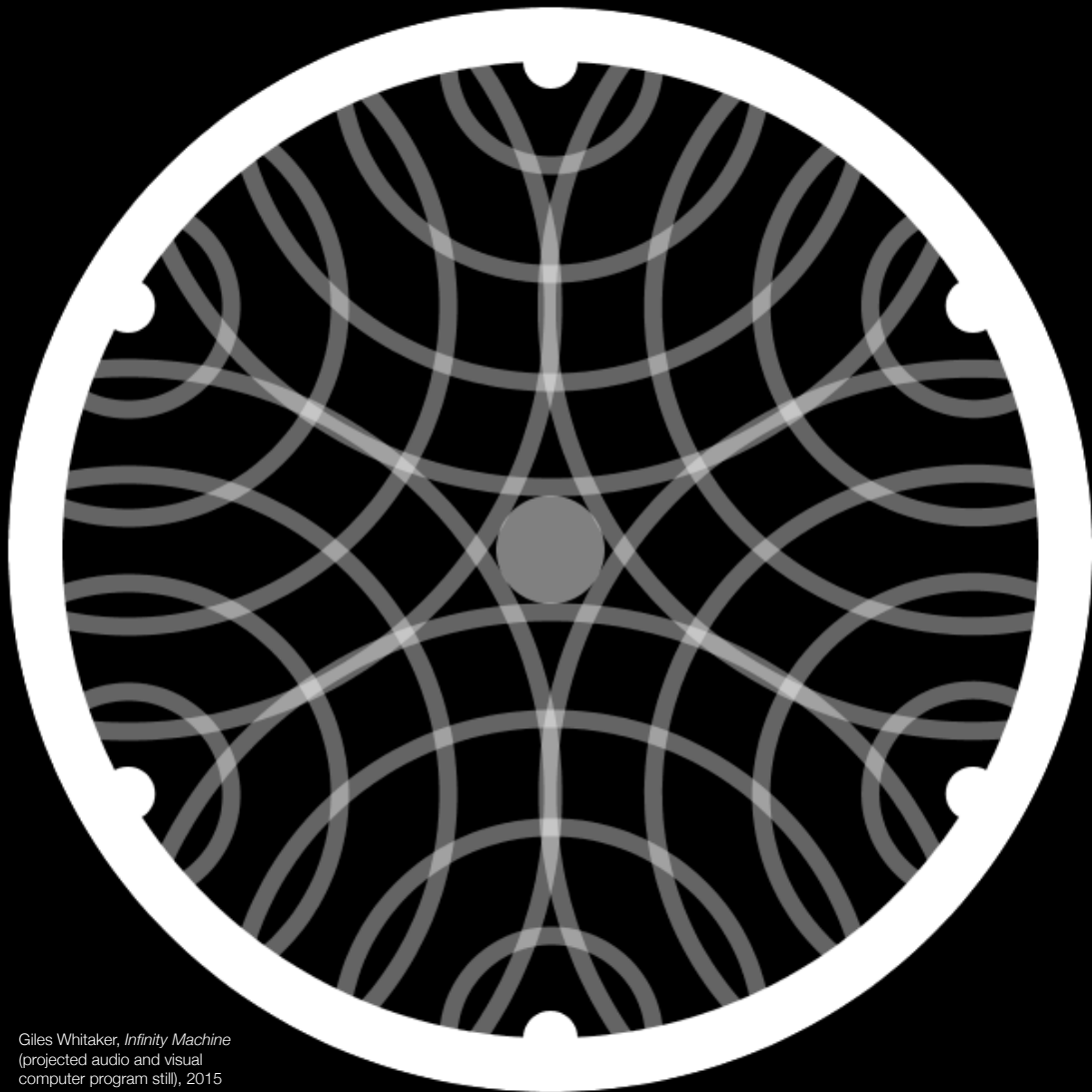
Such forms of popular culture, television and cinema in particular, exert indelible force on cultural identity construction. Nahed Mansour’s *Satellite Telefizyoon* appropriates footage from an Egyptian quiz show that was popular in the 1980s, subverting its kitsch with subtitles that quote postcolonial theorists. The result is a delightful juxtaposition of lowbrow Egyptian song and dance spectacle that draws on culture stereotyping, with highbrow analysis of modernism’s colonizing project and its link to globalization. Mansour deftly shows how in the postmodern and postcolonial world, the borders between highbrow/lowbrow, modern/authentic, self/other, are blurred and stretched, highlighting the



Lee Nutbean, *Faux Pas*, participatory  
social media persona, ongoing.  
Installation view, Anita Lee, 2016



Nahed Mansour, *Satellite Telefizyon*  
(video still), 2013 Installation view,  
Caitlin Sutherland, 2016



Giles Whitaker, *Infinity Machine*  
(projected audio and visual  
computer program still), 2015

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mechanics of identity construction as a binary relationship that needs to be made more complex. The work also challenges the reduction of different cultures into stereotypes in popular representations, a reminder of the insidious narratives at work in the collective imagination.


Social media, satellite tv, and other such networks are only part of the technologies that are embedded into everyday life. The infrastructures of contemporary society are built upon the technological. Giles Whitaker's *Infinity Machine* is a comment on this reliance upon machines. It consists of a Java program that randomly combines words, accompanied by a randomly-selected soundtrack of industrial sounds and ambiences with programmatic animations that are generated in real time. Whitaker frames this work as a "musing on how technology has become an end in itself" and that its products are "essentially meaningless."<sup>3</sup> However, just as the site of identity construction does not reside only in the body, here the site of meaning production does not reside wholly in the object. Because words are involved, the mind automatically tries to make sense of it. This randomly-generated text is reminiscent of the automatic writings and wordgames of the Surrealists or the cut-up experiments of the Beat poets, though here the randomizing has been transferred to a computer algorithm rather than the subconscious. Sometimes a phrase produced through *Infinity Machine*, along with the animated image and ambient sound, manages to attain the darkly poetic.

The idea of identity as assemblage takes a playful turn with the self-titled, participatory sculpture installation that accompanies *Proximities*. An assortment of objects allow audience members to "express" themselves through unique arrangements. Here, identity is projected into a fun, spur-of-the-moment event, a performance that proposes art as a matter of *agencement*, that is, focused on compositions and relations, rather than just content. Taken together, the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gileswhitaker.com/#/infinity-machine/>



A photograph showing the back of a person's head. The skin is light-colored and has some texture. Two small, reddish-orange earplugs are visible on either side of the head. The text is printed in a dark, sans-serif font. The text is arranged in two lines: the first line contains 'name:' followed by 'fauxpas1@hotmail.com' on the next line. The second line contains 'pass:' followed by 'fauxpas' on the next line. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

name:  
fauxpas1@hotmail.com

pass:  
fauxpas

Lee Nutbean, *Faux Pas*,  
participatory social media persona  
(photo from installation), ongoing



various works in this exhibition point to the many possible assemblages of identity-making, which is more and more machinic, hybrid with our ubiquitous technologies, networked and connected. As Donna Haraway has argued, the human body is not a discrete thing, not only organic, but enmeshed and arranged with many other things, including technologies, information, affects, energies, events, narratives... and a better way of looking at the fragmented self might through coalition and “affinity, not identity.”<sup>4</sup> The question “who am I” is not only a Buddhist question, then, but the basis of many philosophical searches, political narratives, and art as a reflexive tool that can highlight the many facets of identity as always in the process of rearrangement.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 155.

***Nahed Mansour*** is a Toronto-based Canadian-Egyptian artist whose performances, video works and installations draw on personal and historic narratives to foreground the often under-represented relationships between entertainment, labor, and race. The popular iconic entertainers she references in her work become apertures for thinking about the ways racial identities are performed and negotiated in the post-colonial present. She has an MFA in Open Media from Concordia University and is the Programming Coordinator at SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre).

***Lee Nutbean*** is a postinternet artist working at the transdisciplinary intersections of art and computation, across academia, research and the creative industries. His work explores the evolution of smart networked technologies through the participatory design of provocative prototypes that elicit, process and respond to inspirational data. These electronic ecologies culturally probe the dynamic networks within and between corporeal and viral spaces, to reveal new phenomena that confront, question and push new digital practices.

***Giles Whitaker*** works with video, photography, machines, microcontrollers, and found objects. Sound is a key element of his installations, which aim to reveal and analyze the political and cultural properties of the spaces they occupy. Giles completed his undergraduate degree in Wellington, New Zealand, and his MFA at Western University, London, Ontario. His past exhibitions in New Zealand and Canada include abstract video, sound, and interactive multimedia installations.



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Cover image: Nahed Mansour, *Satellite Telefizyoon* (video still), 2013

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