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Self-Fashioning

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Self-Fashioning
By Toby Teitel

This 360 Virtual Reality film explores themes of self-determinism and queer representation as I document a group of performers as they undergo an aesthetic transformation. The film examines the intersection between VR capabilities and fine arts, by integrating elements of 3D sculpture and immersive theatrical staging. *Self-Fashioning* is a virtual homage to queer nightlife fashion, and references films like *Paris is Burning* in an effort to carry the torch of extravagant visual culture that finds its roots in the ballroom scene in New York during the mid to late 80s. The disco music and vibrant colors in the film infuse the environment with a message of empowerment and the viewer is imbued with a sense of joy and confidence.

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Introduction

My thesis project called Self-Fashioning explores the ways in which fashion, make-up, and queer aesthetics build community and cultivate identity. The video is filmed, constructed, and displayed in Virtual Reality 360-degree video in an effort to engage in the blossoming discourse surrounding this emerging technology and its connections to existing forms of art such as film, music, fashion, and performance art. Through practical experimentation in VR, I enacted spatial research that bridges the junctions between existing film theory and literature of sociocultural and aesthetic movements. I hope that my work in VR will contribute to a legacy of artistic innovation and further opportunities for research in Virtual Reality.

As Virtual Reality is still in its formative years, theorists and practitioners have only just begun the process of weaving connections between VR and the fine arts. This is partially due to a prohibitive barrier to entry in which only those with a VR headset can experience and experiment within the field, and the cost of these devices has relegated them to serious gamers, medical researchers and pilots in training. With the advent of new, cheaper headsets, the field is poised to venture into novel experiences in both art and commerce.

Just as the print advertisements in Vogue leapt off of the page and onto our laptop screens with the introduction of digital video, I have created a niche in VR fashion films that incorporates elements of sculpture, theater, music and performance art. My engagement with these components has been translated into original practical research in the form of a 4-minute-long fashion film that takes inspiration from conventions of music videos, theatrical performances and queer culture. The film is a foray into the intersection between drag, performance art, and technology as the project is structured around the visual narrative of 6 LGBTQIA+ people. At the start of the film, they are shown alone within gilded picture frames wearing a simple black tank top and jeans. This simple outfit is intended to underscore the

aesthetic transformation that occurs over the course of the film. The film tracks the models through the transformation process as make-up and other aesthetic adornments are added. Once the models have self-fashioned themselves into the powerful portrayal of themselves that they chose from their own wardrobe and supplies, they are imbued with a sense of self-determination, pride and joy. In this way, the film is a form of documentary as I capture the authentic routine and transformation of a group of performers and friends. This film references another documentary, *Paris is Burning* with an audio sample from two of the stars Octavia Saint Laurent and Venus Xtravaganza.

Self-Fashioning is situated within a larger context of contemporary queer media that has benefitted from technological advancements in streaming and distribution. Online distribution services such as Netflix, YouTube and WOWPresents, have made shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Pose* and accessible to queer people around the world. Online communities of fans have formed a robust culture and industry from the drag performers and transgender actors on these programs and often use these forums as a means of finding and connecting with other queer people. As my film will be widely available on YouTube, I aim to augment this surge in nuanced representation and resonate with people around the world.

The film is formatted to be viewed with a Virtual Reality headset, such as a Google Cardboard or HTC Vice. 3D rendered environments wrap around the 360 field of view and immerse the viewer in a fully fabricated mis-en-scene of kaleidoscopic colors and surreal settings. A grid is present beneath the viewers' intangible feet to lend sense of spatial orientation and gravity. This shape pays homage to the aesthetic movement of Vaporwave digital art, which often emphasizes the artificiality and technological distortions of reality that became widely available to graphic designers in the early 2000s. The grid serves two-fold as a dancefloor upon which the staging and dancing occurs.

The written portion of this thesis project serves as an auxiliary defense of the visual research I have conducted and an avenue of analysis into the film through contextualization amongst existing film history, queer theory, and arts practices. First, I will introduce a brief introduction to the applications of Virtual Reality and film history and theory that engages with relevant themes in the project. Next, I address the representation of queer people in media and the way in which technological advancements retain the cultural values within which they are created. As a content creator, it becomes my responsibility to create narratives with a socially aware and engaged message, as an effort to propagate positive change and visibility for the LGBTQ community. Then, I introduce the existing literature about the concept of aesthetic self-fashioning. This spans from philosophical engagement to historical evidence of gender expression in the Tang Dynasty. Finally, I incorporate a dialogue into the intersection between Virtual Reality and fine arts, including painting, drawing, sculpture and theater. I juxtapose the techniques of production and inspirations in my film to other methods of artistic expression and existing VR experiences such as The VR Museum of Fine Arts.

The film's references and context enrich the immersive experience of viewing the project, ultimately engaging the viewer in a vibrant discourse of queer expression and technological advancement in the arts.

VR History and Film Theory

Theories and applications of Virtual and Augmented Reality have existed since 1901 and are tied to technological advancements for war. Sir Howard Grubb attempted to create a telescope that would help "aim projectile firing weapons" in which "a fine beam of light like that from a search light would be projected from a gun in the direction of its axis and so adjusted as to correspond with the line of fire so that wherever the beam of light impinged upon an object the

shot would hit" (Aukstakalnis). Fans of Halo and Call of Duty will recognize this feature as a Red Dot sight, although the image of a red dot on a character's forehead has become a ubiquitous pop culture reference to sniper shots. Widespread use of VR technology can be traced back to WWII in which over two million soldiers were trained in immersive virtual flight simulators (Aukstakalnis). While the solders did not wear HMDs or Head Mounted Devices like the VR goggles that are available today, they were sat in real hollowed out plane cockpits that were calibrated to display levels of altitude corresponding to the mechanical direction inputs a pilot would use when they are up in the air. The U.S. Marine Crops utilized a Heads Up Display in their fighter jets for the first time in 1958 and over two million soldiers in WWII were trained in a virtual flight simulator. The technology projected important data and symbols onto the outfacing glass allowing the pilot to read altitude, while scanning the battlefield for threats.

Virtual Reality technology is reaching a tipping point at which the price and quality of experience are meeting consumer expectations. Many trace this moment to March 25, 2014, when Facebook acquired Oculus (Wagner). Suddenly, Oculus transformed from a virtual reality startup, into a global product, and the number of venture capital deals and total dollars in VR tripled within that quarter (Wagner). Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg has been vocal about his belief that VR would infiltrate many realms of society including sports, health care, and gaming. This infusion of corporate legitimacy created a race in the industry to create more products and experiences for early adopters of the medium. Oculus recently released their first untethered HMD called the Oculus Go and are slated to release an update in the Oculus Quest in the second half of 2019. Google entered the arena by carving out a niche for themselves by focusing on the transforming smartphones in VR capable devices. Their release of the Google Cardboard, priced at $15, reduced the barriers of entry and brought VR to thousands of new consumers and businesses of varied disciplines.

This field offers new avenues of cinematic theoretical exploration and implores researchers to connect relevant psychodynamic, psychological, and biological theories to the new medium. Researchers from the IEEE Engineering in Medicine and Biology Society have begun to discover the ways in which virtual reality activates mirror neurons in the brain, which are our body's way of learning through imitation (Kommalapati). Due to the realistic and immersive experience that VR offers, clinicians have used the technology as a means of physical rehabilitation for children who cannot imagine overcoming their physical impairments. The activations of mirror neuron system increased motivation and provided therapeutic benefits to sensorimotor performance (Kommalapati). Mirror neuron dysfunction is associated with autism as those with autism often have difficulty identifying with emotions, motivations and actions of other people. VR therapy has been used to activate mirror neurons in patients with autism as a way of replicating external perspective. Hospitals have begun to use Virtual Reality as an accompaniment to opiate administration as patients reported similar levels of sedation with a full dose of opiates in comparison to half a dose of opiates with a supplementary visual aid. The ability to temporarily suspend reality has been explored in the field of psychiatry as researchers from the Journal of Clinical & Diagnostic Research have used Virtual Reality Therapy to immerse participants in relaxing environments for mental stress reduction (Vishal, 11). These immersive experience stems from the underlying question of the manipulation of self-consciousness, proprioception and ego.

Even in its most rudimentary form, VR has a disembodying effect, in which a person loses connection to their bodily form and inhabits the form of the protagonist or camera. The camera serves as both a watchful eye, and a neutral observer as VR does away with much of the framing and forced perspective taking of narrative cinema. Albert Van der Veer at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen, Germany conducted an experiment to

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discover where people perceive their corporeal form in virtual space. In general, when people are asked to locate themselves on a human silhouette, they overwhelmingly choose the upper head and chest to indicate the mind and soul that represents current human understanding of consciousness. This largely was supported in a virtual reality setting of the experiment, as 69% of participants identified themselves in the upper head near the eyes (Van der Veer, 8). This factors into a larger discussion of film theory as this concept relates directly to psychodynamics and Jean-Louis Baudry's identification of the cinematographic apparatus of ego substitution. Once the viewer is immersed in the VR environment, I have encoded spatial experiences to reinforce, and distort the proprioception of one's self-identification. I've done this by activating motor neurons as the audience is encouraged to move along with the model to the beat. I experimented with a full disembodying effect, as I donned a full green screen body suit and danced on the Williamsburg Bridge. The green screen body suit acts in the exact opposite way as the green screen background. The green background transports the corporeal models to a virtual environment, while the green screen bodysuit snatches away all dimension from the green pixels in the human form. I postulate that the human viewers will identify the shape of a fellow human's movements, and as such they will experience mirror neuron activation and feel connected to the movements of the form. Furthermore, the intangible texture, color and experience of the human form will trigger a disembodied effect and the audience will supplant their consciousness into the human form.

Baudry contributed his theory to Film Quarterly in 1974 and his queries remain relevant in an increasingly self-motivated and self-centered entertainment experience. Baudry argued that the perspective construction of cinema is a reconstruction of the depth of field introduced in Renaissance paintings. The depth effect is reliant on an active eye, or camera, that forms a vanishing point within the boundaries of the two-dimensional frame. While the boundaries have

been removed and the eye is newly fitted into a fully rotational socket, the theory of active

spectatorship remains. Baudry says, "film history shows that as a result of the combined inertia

of painting, theater, and photography, it took a certain time to notice the inherent mobility of the

cinematic mechanism… the ability to reconstitute movement… to seize movement is to become

movement, to follow a trajectory is to become trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the

possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning. In this way the

eye-subject…becomes absorbed in, 'elevated' to a vaster function proportional to the movement

which it can perform" (Baudry). Baudry seems privy to the possibility of inventions that would

be decades in the making including VR experiences on rails in which the VR camera rolls along

a defined track either in real life as positioned on the top of a documentary car, or a rolling

hypothetical camera programmed within a 3D rendered environment. Although the 360 degrees

of visual field are uncompromised by the direction of the spectacle, the movement and direction

of the camera gives the viewer the sensation of directing their own movie, if not sublimating into

the movie entirely. In this way, the visual field becomes a mirror into one's own subjective

perceptions and reactions to the environment. Baudry's theory falters in its application to virtual

reality as he says, "the paradoxical nature of the cinematic mirror-screen is without doubt that it

reflects *images* but not 'reality'… this 'reality' comes from behind the spectator's and if he

looked at it directly he would see nothing except the moving beams from an already veiled light

source" (Baudry). This interpretation is reliant on the media consumption model in which a

person sits in a dark room with a centrally controlled projector overhead projecting a fixed

image. Virtual Reality capitalizes on this very distinction that separates the form from its

predecessors. I argue that the dismantling of the frame further enhances the identification effect.

Those who are immersed in VR, are dissociated away from the reminders of their corporeal form

and are introduced to a new field of vision that maintains worldly conventions of vanishing

point, perspective and depth. In this way, the cinematic apparatus of substitution is further disembodied and reassembled in a fully realized in a seemingly tactile environment.

Beyond the base of film theory that interplays with every piece of audiovisual content, a crop of Virtual Reality theorists have begun to stitch existing concepts to new technologies and modes of media consumption. All forms of art serve as some means of storytelling whether narrative and/or aesthetic. Hisham Bizri at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Chicago began researching the historical and artistic analogies between cinema and virtual reality as early as 1996. He hoped to "experiment with how the visual language of traditional optical-based cinema could be extended and transformed by using the tools of virtual reality." He was concerned with the spatio-temporal, ontological and oneiric possibilities presented by constructed a narrative via the projection of computer-generated moving images as opposed to the use of optically generated moving images." These terms refer to continuity editing, the sensation of being, and the dreamlike trance that cinema and VR induce. He compares the intimate darkened cinema theater to the immersive cave like projection environment in which the photographic quality suggests a copy of reality. Virtual Reality films have the ability to replicate memories, thoughts and even dreams as the image appears to be real yet holds an eerie dreamlike quality in the pervasive reminder of the goggles pressing against human skin. My film makes no attempt at replicating a realistic reality, rather, I am interested in the realm of surrealistic distortion. Self-Fashioning does not lull the viewer into a false sense of voyeuristic pleasure, rather it jars and electrifies the audience with bright colors surreal Vaporwave inspired environments.

Queer Representation in Film

Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith's article, The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality, deals with the experience of embodiment and representation in VR spaces and argues that "the sensorial body is located within a sociocultural, gendered, and technological context." The researchers refer to the projection of ourselves into an optic panorama, as possibly being tether to fiber-optic sensors and fully instrumented body suits that enable the used to perceive the sensations from their disembodied avatar. Additionally, these researchers postulate that VR space will generate a new forum for discourse surrounding representations of human form. The disembodiment and reconfiguration of sensation relies on the gestalt effect, in which the brain fills in the logical consequential sensations to paint a complete experience in the mind's eye. This can manifest as a vibration of hand-held haptic remote generalizing to a full body sensation of jumping, running, or being shot in a first-person shooter game. My VR experience does not utilize haptic sensors as the viewer will play a largely passive role in the experience. The viewer is disembodied into a virtual color field and submerged into an abstract dreamlike sequence. These scenes are intercut with 360 photographic footage to snap the viewer back to a familiar reality in which corporeal rules of gravity and space apply, but the juxtaposition of these scenes underscores the similarity between evident fabrication of reality and familiar reality. Both can be manipulated to bend the rules of reality, but when exposed to scenes of photographic realism, the gestalt effect will attempt to construct a native recognizable experience. I take advantage of the gestalt effect toward subverting the expectations of audience. The first introduction of one of the models in their self-fashioned form assumes a ghostly form, in which they are captured in a reverse silhouette. The audience tries to reconcile the shape of the non-gender conforming dancer, but the silhouette bears no resemblance to exist cultural iconography, such as bathroom gender indicators.

It is irresponsible to neglect the biases of our historical, social and cultural context when generating art. The authors of The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality take care to underscore the predominantly white, Western, male influence on cultural products and the implications in which representations of diversity can underscore these biases. The authors eloquently state, "When we enter VR, we bring our race with us just as we bring our bodies. In order to encompass a wider corporeal body experience in VR, then, it is necessary to take into account the different sensorial worlds of women and of people from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds" (Murray). Cultural producers risk alienating the bodily experiences of large swathes of people, which does not align with corporate or ethical responsibility. My project will contribute to the elusive queer representation in media that often cannot be pinpointed by the naked eye. Alexander Doty's piece, What Makes Queerness Most?, speaks to the conventional heterocentrist paradigms that relegate expressions of queerness to sub-textual, sub-cultural, *alternative* readings as "after all, mass culture texts are made for the 'average' (straight, white, middle-class, usually male) person." The inclusion of queer people in media takes many forms as a rhetorical strategy to clearly define and label sexual identity often proves futile. As a queer filmmaker, every gaze between men, or hint of gender non-conformity that I include is a cry of active resistance against the dominant images in the media. My work is filled with expressive fashion decisions that both fly by undetected and demand recognition. An essential part of this film is the authenticity that the models brought to the footage. The models were asked to bring a plain black tank top, black jeans and a full head to toe look that made them feel powerful, beautiful, and free. While the film takes the form of a fashion film and music video, the clothing and physical expression transforms the piece into a documentary. Rather than creating a concept and forcing the models to fit into it, the models brought their own stories and portrayed their narrative with each body movement,

dash of pigmented make-up, and strip of fabric. This action of self-construction taps into the title and meaning of the project as Self-Fashioning.

This concept refers to the construction and cultural contextualization that arises from a self-motivated effort to portray a particular image to the outside world and to yourself. The theory manifests in many forms and is not limited to fashion and external displays of transformation. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault introduced concepts of "practices of the self (*Pratiques de soi)*" and focused on the signs and signals of culture and power that are woven into the fabric worn by military men, doctors, and priests (Demenchenok). He continues by postulating that the technologies of power allow people "to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Demenchenok). While everyone has a different idealized self, self-fashioning relates to the way in which we represent and externalize ourselves in an effort to gain a sense of power, freedom and cultural capital. Although this concept has only been granted half a century of formal study, self-fashioning has existed for centuries and is essentially synonymous with cultural formation itself. Fashion and clothing is one element of this philosophical construction that has enduring historical relevance and preservation through visual means such as painting and sculpture. Nowadays, access to clothing has become largely universalized as fast fashion companies like Zara and H&M churn out outfits in every fabric and silhouette; however, access to clothing has historically been strictly delineated based on cultural constructs of wealth, gender and social status.

During the Tang Dynasty from 618-907 in China, "the emperor bestowed official clothing on each subject serving the court to ensure the correct display of status…dress that did not accord with a subject's social status was considered a criminal offense- for example, the wearing of a color that did not correspond to one's rank was to be punished by 40 blows with a

light stick" (Chen, 8). BuYun Chen, a Chinese historian at Swarthmore, has identified the way in which self-fashioning transforms these political dignitaries into status symbols themselves due to the reinforced equivalence between rank and material goods. The constructed value of the person was further dissected based on gender as the male served as the public body, while the women's dress corresponded "to the male household to which they belonged and, as such, was adapted to adhere to the colors and fabric assigned to husband's ranking" (Chen, 9). These strict rules detracted from the self-determinism inherent in self-fashioning, and as such led to a populist revolution. Once the aristocratic society began transitioning into a meritocratic one, merchants tapped into an increasingly individualistic society in which people "constructed and communicated ideas about themselves within the larger world." (Chen, 10) Despite strong pushback from Tang scholar-officials who declared the incoherence between class and dress would lead to chaos, both men and women enjoyed newfound liberties to express their self-conception. Up until that point, women were only permitted to wear two styles of approved silhouettes. This included the ceremonial garb and the ordinary *banbi* for everyday wear. Deviation from these silhouettes signaled misconduct and in some cases cross-dressing was considered a serious transgression against the empire. In a society defined by clothes, a woman's use of the male *hufu* undercut the status quo and signaled a fluid gender and cultural identity. Furthermore, it heralded an age in which female presenting people demonstrated "image-making" techniques that afforded them gendered traits of toughness and power. Centuries later, John Locke proposed a "body-clothes analogy" in which "personal identity as a form of consciousness sustainable through a change of bodies" would produce a "sartorial body" that assumes its own distinct perceivable identity (Lee, 458). This concept can be applied to disparate generations of sartorial adornment from China to Ireland. In fact, the phrase "self-fashioning" can be traced back to sixteenth-century England, and it signified the "increased self-

consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (Lee, 459).

Self-Fashioning is not limited to fabric and clothing alone. Oscar Wilde was famous for his conscious decision to grow out his hair, which over time became a novelty symbol of Wilde himself. During Oscar Wilde's lifetime in the Regency Period, the hairstyle trended toward short hair and bearded faces in reaction to the elaborate wigs and embellishments of the preceding century (Gupta). Toward the end of the 19th century, cases of women with beards drew huge crowds to circuses and sideshows, leading to a widespread cultural discourse into "what exactly it meant to be female" (Gupta). Oscar Wilde subverted both of these cultural expectations by establishing a brand for himself of having long hair and a clean-shaven face. His hair paired with his famously flamboyant personality and garb to create an infamous externalized identity that lived in fable and tinged his poetry and prose with a cloud of queerness. Considering the cultural norms and oppressive legislature against homosexuality at the time, artists like Oscar Wilde used fashion and aesthetics to acquire respect and power within in a hostile environment.

Paris is Burning, directed by Jennie Livingston, is one of the preeminent films in the field of queer cinema. Livingston's documentary paints a rich portrait of vogue dance battle culture with intense contrast between the glamour and fantasy of the performance and the dire conditions of ball's participants. The film shines a light on the drag ballroom scene in which different groups of performers form "houses" or chosen families. These houses compete for trophies in different categories and the performer that can emulate the "realness" of the performative category wins a trophy. This group of predominantly black and Latin gay men select categories that reveal a subversive will to externalize power and internalize identity. Judith Butler notes that many of the categories pull from signs of powerful white males, such as "Ivy League Student" and "Wall Street Banker Realness," while others exalted feminine beauty or

military garb (Schweitzer). Peppered amidst the glitz and the glamour of the extravagant outfits, Livingston includes candid interviews of the cast, many of whom were tragically afflicted by the HIV crisis. Many of the queer people of color in the film struggle against a system that discriminates against them in traditional places of work, and as such resort to survival sex work. The film's great success is in showing the vivacious dignity, glamour, and humanity of these larger than life characters that have taken meaningful steps to craft their identity using make-up, plastic surgery and fashion.

My thesis film similarly shines a light on the spectacular talent of the evolving drag culture in Atlanta. While the expanding discourse surrounding gender identity has loosened the binary between waking up as a man and going to the ball or club as a woman, many of the models embodied hyper feminine or hyper masculine traits in their use of wigs, make-up and clothes. The models were filmed before without adornment and after with a full array self-fashioning techniques. Once the transformation has taken place, the models occupy both physical and virtual space differently, undulating their hips like a 1920's flapper girl, or "waacking" and "voguing" like a supermodel. These dance movements are alive and well today and find their roots in the decades of LGBTQ nightclub culture. By encoding these essentially queer dance techniques in VR space, I aim to serve the queer community as a documentarian and artist. Ultimately, this project will contribute to a pool of queer art that will influence and empower viewers directly and indirectly.

VR in the Arts World

Virtual Reality holds immense promise as a boundless canvas for artists of varied disciplines and methodologies. By deconstructing the tools that coalesce to give the impression of reality, I aim to tie my work into a greater discussion of the intersection between Virtual

Reality and fine arts. I examine the building blocks of VR such as 3D modeling and staging to engage audiovisual elements of *Self-Fashioning* in the robust existing discourse of theater and sculpture. While the cast of characters may have never truly assumed the choreography that the viewer experiences in VR, their composited forms are able to resemble the depth and gravity of a fully immersive staged theatrical production. *Self-Fashioning* includes 3D rendered elements such as the dancefloor, and the background environments that replicate conventions of sculpture and theater in the verisimilitude to tangible objects and replication of light and shadows. By examining the current state of VR and fine arts, I intend to set a benchmark from which to compare my work, and a context within which I contend my work has illustrated novel research.

As a filmmaker, I intend to explore the connection between existing two-dimensional filmmaking techniques and VR 360 space. In the first VR film I created *Heaven Scent*, I mixed two-dimensional found footage and integrated it into the 360 space. This experiment proved successful as the seemingly flat screen was encoded with spatial metadata and assumed a curved and dynamic shape that adapted to the angle of the eye. This test opened the door for future exploration into the intersection between two-dimensional art and virtual space. I expanded upon this test, by testing out the limits of a traditional green screen. I theorized that by utilizing a green screen that extended beyond the model's feet, I could composite the models out of the real world and fully immerse them in a VR canvas. This manifests at the start of the film when the models are shown behind gold picture frames that wrap horizontally around the 360 degrees of vision. I chose these frames to make a nod to the gilded definition of high art and to suggest that queer culture and art should be valued just as much as a painting in a traditional museum.

One VR experience that has mastered the intersection between virtual reality and art is The VR Museum of Fine Art on Steam. This program can be played on any Steam compatible Head Mounted Device such as the HTC Vive. I was able to explore a fully three-dimensionally

rendered environment that took the form of a classic museum with accompanying stereophonic sounds of ambient footsteps and indistinguishable chatter. The two floors of the museum space are filled with many of the most iconic plastic arts ever created including the Birth of Venus and Monet's Waterlilies. I was drawn to the sculptures that were recreated to the finest detail as their inclusion spoke to a paradox of three-dimensional objects recreated and represented in an immersive experience. While the paintings were wall mounted, the sculptures enabled the viewer to approach closer and closer until the viewer quite literally phases through the encoded layers of three dimensionally rendered and can look at the external shell of the sculpture from within. In this way, the artist and coder of the VR experiences reveals the farce and delight in confounding the human eye by tricking the user into the sensation of a truly immersive, navigable environment when in reality, the user is looking at a screen similar to an iPhone or projection in a movie theater.

My experience in the VR Museum of Fine Art inspired me to incorporate 3D elements that would appear to occupy physical space within the field of view. I worked with a freelancer to source 3D scans of sculptures from the Hermitage Museum in Russia and the National Gallery in London. These copyright free scans were created for exactly this type of creative extrapolation, as I animated them the orbit the user's field of view. The result is a type of dynamic sculpture garden that maintains laws of light and shadow, despite being a flat image on a screen.

An essential part of understanding virtual space is becoming familiar with 3D models or CADs. Simply free software such Blendr and Google Sketchup allow users to experiment with three-dimension polygons, cubes, cylinders and more. In addition to these surfaces, "there are other features and attributes of these models, including textures, light reflection properties and transparency, sound reflection properties and strength properties." Once defined, a CAD can be

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rotated and manipulated in space in the X, Y, and Z-axis'. In this way, a participant has the

ability to track through the environment. Haptic sensors often include buttons and joysticks and

sensors, which respond to the standing user's arm motions. This can be used to warp through

space and give viewers unique vantage points of art, as demonstrated in the VR Fine Arts

Museum. I plan to incorporate three-dimensional CADs into the final product as abstractions and

representations of reality. My desire to include these element stems from my experience in 3D

modeling, as well as 3D printing and their logical integration into VR. Once a 3D CAD is

created, it can be filmed with a two-dimensional camera and linked to a video game that uses

controllers, or haptic sensors to animate the 3D elements and environment within the frame. It

can also be printed and occupy physical space in a two or three-dimensional environment,

leading to endless permutations of virtual and artificial representations of real-life elements. I

was inspired by the music video Koi by a prominent queer rapper Le1f, who includes flying

color-shifting koi fish that swim in the blue sky above the human subjects who dance to the

music. The sculptor of these CADs acts in concert with the filmmaker to create a dynamic

sculpture that serves as a purely digital mis-en-scene.

I utilized 3D CAD versions of the models to underscore one of the key thematic points of

the project. Avatars that were designed to resemble the self-fashioned version of the models are

included in the film to represent the intersection between queer identity and technology,

including social media and video games. These avatars are infused the with semblance and spirit

of the models to show how many young people use programs such as Instagram and The Sims, to

curate and customize their aesthetic representation. While games like The Sims allow users to

choose everything from height, skin color, hair color, and clothes, Instagram similarly functions

as an avatar creation dashboard. Users log-in and create content to support the image that they

want to project into the world and receive feedback in the form of comments and likes from

other users who appreciate and similarly self-fashion themselves. The result is an effervescent technological ecosystem that is teeming with avatars and digitized self-representations.

Virtual Reality bears many functional similarities to theater as the mis-en-scene is paramount in creating an immersive experience. Unlike in traditional filmmaking where the only accessible content lies within the frame of the lens, VR 360 cameras captures every corner of the room it inhabits. In practice, this means that the filmmaker must take care to rid the set of any non-diegetic camera equipment or lighting, as these irregularities would jar the viewer out of the dreamlike state that cinema and VR create. As a result, the set must be dressed from corner to corner as the viewer peers around examining the photographically realistic world around them. Scott deLahunta delves into this phenomenon in his piece Virtual Reality and Performance. He speaks to the challenge of integrating choreography and dance in virtual reality, as dance has classically been developed to "dance for the camera" (DeLahunta, 111). The tradition of frontality in this spectacle proves to be a challenge for choreographers as they must adapt to the full field of view available in VR. DeLahunta offers a challenge to creators as "creating the best conditions for choreographic responses to virtual reality will require a greater commitment on the part of choreographers as well as the creative technologists to successfully and effectively incorporate dance into these environments." In my practice films, I have already experimented with choreography and the positions of human forms in the frame. My film Heaven Scent includes a built-in perspective taking exercise as the two main characters are often featured on different sides of the camera. By forcing the viewer to choose field of view, they can only see and empathize with one character at a time. Exhibition of this film is frequently followed up with a second viewing in which the viewer can choose a different direction to follow. In my final thesis film, I have experimented with choreography in both two- and three-dimensional space. The models in the project were positioned on a seamless green screen that gave way to the

illusion of a 3D environment. As they pose and dance, their forms assume patterns of symmetry and coordination that is supported by the mathematical grid, which grounds their movements.

Another connection to fine art that I have included is painting and drawing. With the advent of Google Tilt Brush, artists can paint in three-dimensional space with handheld haptic sensors. The added dimension allows artists to create depth and add meaning to flat images. This was an integral element in pre-visualizing the environments and mis-en-scene that I implemented in for the final project. The capabilities of Tilt Brush truly introduce a new medium in which VR meets traditional plastic arts as the artist is given a wide array of inks, paints, brush tips, and colors to experiment with. The ability to manipulate shapes and color has now become integrated into most editing platforms. My use of montage with the program Adobe Premiere allows surreal transitions of color and form using hue shifters and dissolves. By taking advantage of the ability to stack layers of color and form, I created entirely new environments by inversing the color palette and fusing two distinct animations. Additionally, my use of the traditional shape of the gold picture frame references the medium of painting, while questioning the boundaries of its definition and application.

Conclusion

My experimentation with Virtual Reality filmmaking has been informed by research into the stream of relevant research in parallel fields such as theater, film, and performance art. The execution of each scene bears in mind the history of queer aesthetics, cinema and fashion, while engaging in theoretical research into disembodied experiences and audiovisual engagement. *Self-Fashioning* is a foray into the intersection between plastic arts, virtual reality, music videos, fashion films, and documentaries, with the intention of amplifying the art of the models and artists. The intended effect should range from tapping your foot along with the beat, to losing

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yourself into the fields of colors and texture. Upon completion, the audience will have experienced life in the shoes of another, and closely examine the constructions of their own self-fashioned identities.

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