

Abstract

Scripting for Agency uses performance, storytelling and the cultivation of relationships with fictional characters, to estrange a set of popularly held assumptions about the “mechanics of self”. These include unconscious assumptions which underpin current debates about identity within the public sphere, such as the ethics of appropriation, self-identification, belonging, identity taxonomies, the recent worldwide rise in nationalism and xenophobic sentiment, and related issues. Rather than focusing on specific subject positions or identities, the project responds to more elementary studies of self, with a focus on testing, expanding, troubling or elaborating some of the *a priori* assumptions about *how self works*: its shape, movement, plasticity, mechanism, and scope. In service of this focus, the project intentionally employs methods that suspend value judgments on the ethics of identity and positionality, with a view to exploring instead the possibility of radically reframing these same debates by way of experimentally examining their foundations.

The project begins by identifying self mechanics as a field devoted to theorising on the 'architecture of agency', bringing together examples from art, psychology, anthropology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, metafictional literature and evolutionary theory. It then proposes a set of performance art experiments as instruments for yielding new knowledge in this area, not only theoretically, but empirically. The thesis forms in turn a provocation on how art can infiltrate theory making in fields outside itself.

Embarking from the well-documented psychological phenomenon of frame-switching, where it has been shown that people switch their behaviour, personality, and cognitive mechanisms depending on which 'cultural frame' they situationally adopt, my project expands this phenomenon to consider the role of 'character' in the mechanics of self. It is especially concerned with troubling the perceived relationship between 'self-consistency' and 'authenticity', through *performance, reading and writing*.

These three activities all depend on turning a human being into a 'substratum' across which a text is played out, allowing for a kind of exchange of consciousness (e.g. performer → character; reader → text). Through a performance practice in which I am

periodically possessed by fictional characters, my project is concerned with developing an aesthetics of self-hybridity and “comfort in contradiction”, inhabiting these self-conceptions, and phenomenologically reporting the movements my self makes in my character performances.

In parallel to the project, I am writing *Anomaline*, a novel in which I negotiate the dynamics of an author-character relationship, forming the ‘unconscious’ or ‘background radiation’ of the visible practice. The novel will be submitted as documentation, along with a series of performance works and a written dissertation exploring the following three hypotheses, all of which were yielded by the practice itself:

1. Character is a pattern which ‘plays out’ across a substratum that is embedded within a social milieu. A person is that which is capable of playing out characters.
2. Character both enables and demarcates the limits of what is thinkable to a person at a given time.
3. The line might serve as a better visual model for ‘the shape of a self’, than the traditional ‘vessel’, which foregrounds interiority as a mark of agency. This hypothesis forms the beginning of a kind of ‘string theory of self’, where the self is figured as a field which ripples to the energy of memetic contagion.