ABSTRACT

*Digital Other* is a combination video art project and thesis paper that addresses the problems of encountering others and mediating oneself through the digital screen. The project explores issues of control and surveillance through an investigation of my own experience as user and voyeur but also suggests that these issues haunt the structure of my subjectivity regardless of screen mediation. In the video, my entangled relation to a ghostly black and vaguely female Other on a screen suggests a power dynamic that plays out in my own self-mediation—a process that uses the Other without ever understanding her difference from me. This Other robs me of fingers, teeth, and eyes across the distance of screen mediation and thereby displays her power over me even as I surveil her. This paper builds on literary and philosophical references in order to ground the idea that the process of developing a self is structured according to imbalances in power, some of which play out through gender difference as well as through racial difference. This thesis argues for a digital understanding of this imbalance, brings these discussions into a contemporary context of digital technology, and situates the project in the field of video and performance art. Through the five theoretical lenses of (1) psychoanalysis, (2) feminism, (3) media theory, (4) critical theory and (5) philosophy, this paper contextualizes this video project and my overall video art practice within a larger history of critical thinking and artistic self expression.
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INTRODUCTION

Digital Other is a video project that investigates how the Other is experienced and filtered through the digital screen, both generally and in light of recent developments in digital technology. The historical and philosophical roots of this term, “the Other,” will be important in this text, but can also be understood as designating everyone who is other than, and relative to, me as subject. The Other is abstract and singular— not “others” but “the Other” — and the logical relation between the many, specific people in my life and this generic singular abstraction is a central theme in this project. The video positions myself as both watcher and watched, both voyeur and exhibitionist, both self and Other, and in this way conveys existential concepts, doing so through my own psychological experience. The project continues a trajectory— in theme and in form— that persists throughout my work. I continue to be interested in how I am intersected by the Other at the core of my being— how I am a social, networked self through and through—but also how this ever-present and generalized Other is not the same for me as it is for the other real and specific people that populate my world. To put this another way, I exist as a self on one side of a self/other binary, but the other people in my life are each a self also, and so exist as a self in their own self/other binary. No single particular other person, then, is actually the Other that lives within me, that defines my interior self-relation. My art is a way for me to speak this Other outwardly and, in so doing, confront both myself and viewers with my specificity.

There is a very dominant Other in my work, but viewers are not addressed as that Other because my work enacts a lack of reciprocity and an un-knowing in relation to them. I perform in front of my own camera and then layer the footage with additional images and symbols. This process of switching many times between performance and editing allows me to be both subject and object in the work, folding the Other back into myself and into my
performance as if to digest the idea that this Other is actually interior to me. In my piece, No ‘No,’ I use two channels of video on adjacent walls to display scenes from my dreams with corresponding scenes that depict visual associations, as if I were dreaming in one channel and undergoing analysis in the other channel. The viewer here is cornered between my immediate experience and my mediated self. Digital Other is unique for me in that it draws an analogy between the binary of self and other and the binary of digital code, asserting that there is a digital aspect of my existence regardless of screen mediation. It insists that the screen is an instantiation of this binary more than it is a window into real other people, and it examines the almost solipsistic nature of this dynamic.

Digital Other consists of three similarly structured vignettes that show me sitting down at a desk with a computer monitor and surveilling a pitch black, featureless, but vaguely female figure who occupies a mostly white room. This figure is “the Other” within the piece. In each vignette, the Other enacts a theft of one of my physical features: first fingers, then teeth, then eyes. These body parts travel through, and are replicated on, the monitor in front of me. After each one of these performances, the Other leaves her room and comes to occupy the office chair where I originally sat in front of the screen. She then sheds her black exterior—created using a green suit and chroma key effects—and appears as a renewed version of myself who in turn surveils the same exact Other through the screen. The result loops such that my double identity of self and Other converges together at the end of each vignette only to split again when the next one begins. Through this process, the screen mediates my own binary and dialectical relationship to myself. Me and my Other are in a constant exchange through the screen and yet I am the only person in the video with any identifiable features, and this fact dramatizes the solipsism of an entirely interior world. In the piece, I reference the reality of externally real other people only in the display strategy of the piece: the media plays on the same monitor that is depicted within the piece, on the same desk and with the same office chair. If viewers choose to sit down at the chair, they are opting into the back end of my own binary differentiation of self and Other. Humor is an important aspect of my work
because of the inherent absurdity in displaying those systems that are internal to me precisely in their exclusion of others. Inviting viewers into this back-end development of self ends up as an absurdly comical gesture: they are asked to enter a space that they have—at least in everyday life—no reason to enter.

This project follows in a lineage of video art practices where artists interface with camera and screen in order to display their self-mediation to viewers. This history can be traced back to the 1960’s and 1970’s with artists such as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci. Since the emergence of the internet radically changed the accessibility and capability of screen mediation, many video artists responded accordingly by investigating the renewed slipperiness of cultural references which service formations of self. Ryan Trecartin, for instance, plays with the ambiguity of cultural meaning, pushing and problematizing familiar situations we might see on television. Alex Da Corte mixes surreality with mundane objects and pop culture references, often bringing out latent connections between different kinds of images. My artwork is similarly influenced by the internet, but rather than speaking to shared—albeit ambiguous—references, it returns to the issues of personal identity that are pushed aside by the seeming universality and omnipresence of the web. My work, in general, opens up internal dynamics that are usually closed off to others, giving them access to the oscillations of tension I experience within myself. This project in particular performs the same action but within the context of the web and surveillance, and uses surreal imagery to exaggerate this particular dynamic of control and voyeurism as I specifically experience it. In the piece, the Other lives in a room that is surveilled from above in the manner of security footage, and yet the Other also interfaces with the camera like one would with a web cam. Through these visual cues, I bring my own self-identification and self-alienation into the project and mix the themes of pleasure and death. Digital Other re-inserts the problem of personal identity into the issues of contemporary mediation that Trecartin investigates and also uses surrealist images like Da Corte, but differs in that these psychological associations and cultural references do not operate as if they are necessarily generalizable. In this way, I see my work
as similarly responsive to a contemporary context, but as also returning to the intimacy and self-investigation of those performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s.

The many literary references within this text will solidify my re-approach to the performances of selfhood in the 1960s and 1970s and then will re-connect my strategy of performance and editing back to contemporary society and art. Jacques Lacan is a basic theoretical source for understanding dialectical and dynamic selfhood in contrast to stable identity. His “mirror stage” — the process by which the subject acquires selfhood— is instantiated for me in the computer screen. The feminists, Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, and Laura Mulvey, then become essential to my challenging of the screen as a blank and neutral window to reality. These thinkers help me to articulate a power dynamic at the heart of visibility whereby the feminine is rendered into a regulated and trapped nothingness on which male presence is predicated. I also reference Frantz Fanon, a philosopher and psychoanalyst who investigates the psychology of colonized peoples, to help explain my choice of the Other marked by black.

The crux of my argument in Digital Other then emerges through the media theory about digital technology. I take on the position of Wendy Chun, who understands code to be a medium that is never truly located at its source, despite all pretense of knowing how it operates. I take this understanding and build it into my argument that there is a digital aspect to the binary of self and Other. I trap and locate the Other in order to substantiate my own sense of self and re-assert an expansiveness lost in the alienation that Lacan describes in the mirror stage. The concept of the digital as computational parallels the quantification and labelling of the Other that Phelan seeks to articulate. I then discuss the critical theorists, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and Gerald Raunig, in order to explain how digital technology mediates the fluidity of self amidst the hard, discrete binary of digital code. This discussion will reveal the project’s relevance to contemporary issues of surveillance and the subconscious. Finally, the continental philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas will aid me in my explanation of the Other as an ethical concern in relation to Lacan’s focus on the self. The
feminist philosopher, Luce Irigiray will re-introduce the analog, material way of being-with-others (a coexistence without confrontation) that my piece affirms through its explicit counter example of digital otherness.

A discussion of my work and its relation to the work of other artists—both contemporary and past—will parallel these literary dialogues. I will draw connections to filmmakers with similar interests in Lacanian analysis. As I have explained, the performance aspect of my work borrows from the post-modern performances of selfhood in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the subsequent section on performance I address the meaning of the two figures and how their interaction instantiates problems of identity as manifested in an overly visual system of presence. Phelan takes aim at Lacan’s prioritization of visibility as the source of identification and her work is crucial to understanding my re-psychologizing the screen as visual disclosure: my assertion that the screen is not a blank slate but an already loaded medium. She will help me to explain my choices in the depiction of the Other: the pitch black figure with long hair and flowing dress.

In the third section, my understanding of digitality as computational and numerical will provide a window into the formal choices of the display strategy of *Digital Other*: the screen that plays the media file which also parallels the screen depicted in the work. The section on media theory will also bring the project into the context of contemporary art and post-internet art and position it against modernism. The contemporary artists relevant to my work will emerge here as important interlocutors. The fourth section will bring the critical nature of the project to the surface. This section will ground the themes of surveillance and the unconscious both theoretically—by connecting the feminist criticism to other critical perspectives about power and control—and artistically, through comparison to other artists with similar ethical concerns. In the final section, more abstract operations of *Digital Other* come to light and these will trace a thread once again through my overall work as an artist. This text as a whole will situate the project within my artistic trajectory of externalizing systems of interiority, within a history of performance and visual art, and within a contemporary context of the
digital screen and the corresponding way we process ourselves and deal with Otherness. As this introduction suggests, my text illuminates the form and content of *Digital Other* but does so through iterative dives into different theoretical realms, in an order that builds from fundamental concepts pervading all of my work to the specific concepts that dominate this particular work.

Photograph of the installation piece, No ‘No,’ with viewer
A. Embodiment: Identification and Alienation

In all my videos, I present models and systems that inform my own relationship to myself. This process relies on the fact that I am not simply equivalent to myself in a static identity. Despite my own feeling that I am a particular individual who is the same from day to day, I am in fact growing and changing and always in flux. More interesting for me though is that, in this very statement, I have slipped a contradiction right by: the subject, “I,” has remained constant, and I attributed change to this enduring thing. This contradiction of simultaneous identity and difference, Lacan explains, is in fact embedded within the structure of selfhood and language. We are not born with selves but instead develop selves in what he calls the “mirror stage,” which is a process that combines identity and alienation in one fell swoop, much like my statement about being in flux. He says, “We only have to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image . . .” (Lacan, 2). Identity, in other words, is a process that actually operates across a distance between material body (the body that sees) and visual image (the body as a visible object in the world along with other visible bodies). Lacan asserts this position against Descartes’ cogito, which declares a transparency of oneself to one’s thoughts in an affirmation of individualism (Lacan, 1). Before this process of identification takes effect, there is no self-awareness that would distinguish oneself from the world, so in a way, an infant is, to itself, the entire universe. This means that identification involves the loss of a certain expansiveness: when humans transform from undifferentiated everything to a particular thing among others, they also implicitly realize that their perspective is only one of many. In a strange way, they are a different
person to themselves, and yet they need to constantly assert a sameness over and above that internal difference. The expansiveness of the “I” still lingers: “it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unites the I with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him . . . (Lacan, 2). Lacan’s more frequent term for this expansive, universal self is “ego-ideal.” I, as subject, constantly pursue my ego-ideal across that distance of internal difference. I borrow the term, “the Other” from post-structuralist theory to label the internal difference that always haunts me. Indeed, it is the reality of other people that comes between me and myself, but this “Other” is capitalized because it is the idea of a singular binary opposite to the self rather than any specific individual.

“The Other” is an abstract concept but, in the same way that my self is specific, my “Other” is specific to me as well. Digital Other, like all my videos, seeks to outwardly display this dialectical self-relation, and does so while owning up to the fact that my self-relation is not the same as, say, yours. I wrestle with that Other in all my works in different ways, and I depict that struggle so as to showcase an ontological difference between me and the viewer— a difference on the level of bodies and materiality rather than on the level of vision and representation. Because the viewer is clearly not the Other in my videos, the difference between me and the viewer must run even deeper than how I represent it to myself. The viewer is positioned as the real Other of my work since I acknowledge that the symbolized Other within the piece is just a part of me. I chose to depict this symbolic Other in my piece as existing on the other side of a screen and as a silhouetted, vaguely female figure. This Other haunts me from across that distance of mediation but then transforms into me, only to experience a renewed Other again on the other side. The Other in Digital Other is feminine because gender is a difference more performed as a social operation of power and language than it is a real, stable distinction between two defined categories. The part of the video where the Other unmaskes herself and becomes me suggests that as soon as the Other is absorbed into the self, the Other re-inserts herself into the equation because she is actually the being I represent as part of my active process of identification. The internal difference between me
(body) and myself (image) is the active being of personhood, and it is the Other who maintains that difference.

The Other depicted on the screen within Digital Other

B. Lacan and Film

_Digital Other_ follows in a long tradition of screen-based work informed by Lacan’s ideas. Pietro Bianchi begins his text, _Jacques Lacan and Cinema: Imaginary, Gaze, Formalisation_, with an explanation of how Lacanian psychoanalysis can be used as a framework for understanding cinematic experience. Central to this explanation is an introduction to the idea of “the gaze,” which refers to the way vision is experienced as an object. If I am always mediating my own experience and claiming it as my own, as Lacan suggests, the visible world has an added dimension of meaning. It is not just purely present, but is also negated in that I am often putting it in a context of my particular perspective: “Gaze represents an obstacle preventing the visual space from being constituted as objective and
cohesive” (Bianchi 35-36). I am seeing but I also am seeing that I do not see everything: the spatial presence of the Other means I can infer meaning about the visible world beyond what I simply see in front of me. What this means for cinema is that a great deal of my experience takes place in the identification with perspectives embodied by figures depicted on the screen as well as the perspective of the camera itself. It is important for feminists such as Laura Mulvey that this identification is with a male gaze and that the object of this gaze is not the screen but the objectified women on the screen. In *Digital Other*, the camera frames me as the subject and brings my “gaze” — directed at the screen in front of me— into a problematic but questioned identification with the viewer’s perception. I am the subject within the video and I use that identification to build my position, ultimately by situating myself also as the object in the piece and thereby troubling the initial identification. The object within the piece is a feminine Other and yet I perform this Other in order to clearly express that this function of my gaze is particular to my male perspective rather than being a given universal. Bianchi says of film: “It is the only form of art where the eye of the artist and the mechanical eye that registers the images that will be projected onto the screen are not looking from the same place” (Bianchi 42). *Digital Other* follows in this tradition in that it directly references the act of mediation and the function of the gaze. More specifically, the project drew inspiration in its content from directors who use the idea of the gaze to destabilize the viewer’s experience. David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* famously engages in Lacanian treatment of voyeurism as it pertains to the experience of the Other. Kyle MacLachlan plays a young man who, in a particularly dramatic scene, finds himself spying on Isabella Rossellini’s character through the wooden slats of a closet. I also drew additional inspiration from Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *Dance of Reality*. His film is an abstract autobiography that charts his own formation of self. In the film we are confronted first by a disorienting visible world that begins to coalesce into a more stabilized narrative. In this way, Jodorowsky shows us the various stages of human cognitive development but does so partly by involving the viewer’s perspective. In *Digital Other*, I also borrowed his particular representation of the Other through a blacked-out erasure:
there is a scene where Jodorowsky’s mother character spreads black shoe polish on the auto-
biographical young boy. I use this representation to suggest that asserting the reality of my self is predicated on a negation of the Other.

Still from Digital Other that draws inspiration from Lynch’s Blue Velvet and Jodorowsky’s Dance of Reality
A. Self and Other in Performance

_Digital Other_ is more a self-documented performance in two simultaneous acts than a narrative film, despite those visual parallels previously mentioned. The performance of my body in front of the camera and the performance of editing myself are heavily implied in the work even if not directly visible. I follow in the tradition of performing one’s particular body and subjectivity that began in the 1960s and 1970s. The feminist philosophers of around the same time articulated a dynamic whereby dominant identities systematically assert their universality against an Other that is labeled as deviating from that norm. Specifically, whiteness and masculinity are privileged as universal, and the range of other human traits are cast as differences in relation to that universality. For the feminist philosopher, Peggy Phelan, it is important to note that the very fact that Lacan’s “mirror stage” is oriented around the image means that visibility (as opposed to, say, touch) is uniquely privileged as indicating presence within the world. Early in her text _Unmarked: the Politics of Performance_, she explains that the self’s assertion of its own continuity and stability requires at the same time a corresponding marking of the Other: “In framing more and more the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to fix and arrest, the image of that Other” (Phelan 2).

The masculine experience associates the loss of the original universal and expansive experience with the loss of infantile pleasure, which is largely organized around the phallus. For this reason, the feminine is interpreted as a threatening form whose pleasure is hidden, and the patriarchal structure of society marks the feminine as inferior in order to protect against this threat. In other words, visibility itself is laced with power in its privileged place.
in the construction of reality: “… the visible itself is woven into each of these discourses as the unmarked conspirator in the maintenance of each discursive real” (Phelan 3). Reality is a construct built upon the pure difference of infancy. It is not built impartially but is structured according to power dynamics from the outset. I organized Digital Other across two levels of mediation— the screen and the screen depicted on the screen— in order to display the distance between me and myself as it is embodied by the Other, and I took the further step of masking out this Other in order to render her simultaneously invisible and threatening. The function of surreality in the piece is to re-insert psychological contingency into what is normally considered to be the blank window of the screen. I use psychologically loaded surreal imagery within Digital Other to articulate the tyranny of the visible: its dominance over presence. The screen within the piece is part of a power dynamic instead of just being a tool through which to see the seemingly endless possibility of the internet. This “everything,” as Phelan points out is not neutral but is actually gendered as male and is racially white. It is for this reason that I brought gender and race into the work. My masculinity and whiteness in the work play out in relation to the visuals on the screen, but also are seen to operate through the screen. The screen is overtly the feminine blankness upon which masculinity can assert itself. The nothing-ness of the feminine is employed in the everything-ness of the masculine. This dynamic will surface even more in the section on media theory, where I make my claim about the digital aspect of my existence in relation to others.

The power dynamic proposed by the video is complicated: I am largely the one in power because I essentially surveil the Other who is limited to a room, and yet the power is reversed so as to suggest that my very agency and will as a person is held captive by this Other. My loss of control can be seen in the ritualistic claiming of my fingers, teeth, and eyes. The fingers that type on the keyboard, the teeth that symbolize consumption of the Other, and the eyes that visually devour are, as it turns out in the video, governed by a force both deeply interior to me and horrifically foreign. The Other is, in this way, very much marked but, as such, haunts the possibility of my universality as I engage with the screen. In Phelan’s words: “Within the realm
of the visible, that is both the realm of the signifier and the image, women are seen always as Other; thus The Woman cannot be seen. Yet, like a ubiquitous ghost, she continues to haunt the images we believe in . . .” (Phelan, 6).

My whiteness and maleness are instantiations of my supposed universality, and the way I perform them in contradistinction to the vaguely female and black form of the Other hints at my own general position within society. The visual blackness of the Other has an unavoidably racial association. As a white male, I defend against the threat of the Other not only by marking the opposite gender but, within the context of a society that incorporates other populations, by maintaining minority populations as different and inferior. It is another way in which I try to undo my own loss and inherent lack as an individual: I displace that lack onto minorities. Frantz Fanon was a philosopher and psychoanalyst who, in Black Skin, White Masks, explains that racial otherness is seen, in white terms, as a threat of plenitude rather than of lack (Fanon, 105). He says, “Confronted with this alterity, the white man needs to defend himself, i.e., to characterize “the Other,” who will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires” (Fanon, 105). For this reason, my universality as a white man demands I re-assert lack upon the black body. Since I live within a system of scarcity (intuited in confrontation with the female body), I need to protect what I have from those who have less, because I assume there cannot be enough for everyone. Whereas femininity’s threat is an implicit possibility of becoming her, the threat of blackness is one of fearing the domination of the Other and the theft of my privilege. I use blackness within the piece to mark the Other and at once to label her as monstrous and threatening. By making these latent fears explicit, I acknowledge the various forms of oppression that play out in society, specifically in a society where the internet and screens mediate interpersonal interactions. My intention was to perform my universality but, in so doing, to reveal it from a distance as specific rather than inherently given. This way of enacting one’s specificity comes from the performance art of the same post-colonial period of the 1960s and 1970s. Amelia Jones, in Body Art: Performing the Subject explains the importance of the shift that took place at this time in performance art. Until then, performance
was thought to embody a sort of every-person through the human form. The body was in this way a beautiful epitome of human potential. But around the time when post-modern philosophy developed during a period of decolonization, this universality of human form was revealed as problematic. In response, performers began performing their individual selves—in whatever form—rather than adopting that pretense of the every-person. Jones echoes Lacan’s position in the context of performing one’s body: “Body art is viewed here as a set of performative practices that, through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the de-centering or dislocation of the Cartesian subject of modernism” (Jones, 1). Jones’s position is, like Phelan’s, founded upon an asymmetry and lack of reciprocity. She mentions the work of many female artists who expose the latent content of visibility itself, from Yayoi Kusama to Carolee Schneeman. These artists exposed the “phallocentrism”—the organization around the phallus—of visibility and of artistic expression theretofore.

My work continues in the tradition of someone like Vito Acconci, who reveals the internal structure of his self-involvement and self-relation as always incorporating otherness. In works such as “Centers” (1971), Acconci’s is implicitly (but not visually) doubled: he appears within the work but directs himself into the camera in a way so as to expose an utterly bound-up self-confrontation. Jones describes his work as an “other-directed narcissism” (Jones 48). In other words, it is a display of the self’s reliance on others despite all pretense of self-sufficiency. My work is also inspired by the work of Bruce Nauman, who places the camera conceptually between his self and his body: we as viewers understand that his performance explicitly and knowingly takes place in front of the camera. In a work like “Black Balls” (1969), in which Nauman puts black make-up to his testicles, he brings viewers into his own discontinuity of self by alluding to sexual pleasure and decay (Rush, 72). I have previously displayed my openness to the Other and the dialectal nature of self with multiple screens or through a doubling of my body. In Digital Other, I use levels of mediation and compiled appearances of myself for the same task of displaying the same incompleteness and openness. I display myself in multiple ways at the same time so as to suggest that my selfhood continually searches for continuity within a
process of reconciling its different aspects. The way I mediate myself is constantly changing in relation to others and, in Digital Other, I go so far as to compare this form of self-editing with the literal editing I perform through digital software.

B. Feminism and Film

Where the feminism of Phelan problematizes the objectivity of the visible world in general, the feminist film theorist and critic, Laura Mulvey, applies that same treatment to film. I believe it is important to reference Mulvey’s work because, even though my work does not formally adopt her position, its content is informed by her ideas. Films that feature an easy identification with the perspective of the camera, her argument goes, are inherently oriented around a male gaze and male ego. This is because, as Phelan has shown us, visibility is a form of masculine presence. Even further, the negation that comes between us and our vision—the
negation that functions as part of the symbolic meaning in a film—is a masculine negation of the visible: “But in psycholanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying the threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable…” (Mulvey 840). The feminine perspective, Mulvey says, experiences no such loss naturally but can only bear the burden of that loss as it is re-inscribed on the female body by a patriarchal society (Mulvey 840). Many films double down on this inequality by creating male protagonists whose story plays out through interaction with secondary female roles (Mulvey 838).

**Digital Other** does not challenge the perspective of the camera by rendering it unreliable or personal, but instead makes a claim to universality clearly specific to me as the artist: it steps away from universalization by displaying it from a distance. The repeated over-the-shoulder shots bring the viewer into my gaze through the monitor, but the whole video is installed on the same monitor so as to bring to light the actual specificity of my perspective. My perspective is in this way de-universalized. I will support this claim further in later sections: namely, that **Digital Other** makes explicit the very process of pursuing universality through the image of the Other. In the tradition of surrealism, it brings latent content to the surface, but the latent content in the project is also the secret structure of visibility that Phelan refers to. Male presence is the very possibility of being. So there is no pure and balanced distinction between the genders: the masculine is equivalent to itself without explanation and the feminine is defined against that simple positivity. My intention in displaying the Other as I have, as vaguely female but also as a clear extension of myself, is to reference that imbalance. Phelan says, “Perhaps the best performative example of the phallic function is the theatre of drag. A man imitates an image of a woman in order to affirm that she belongs to him” (Phelan 17). I reveal the artifice of my ownership, the costume of it all, in order to acknowledge the ownership and thereby let go of the viewer. The genericness of the Other is a device through which a real Other can easily shake free from my self-involvement.
A. Defining the Digital

My videos all deal with selfhood and each finds a unique entry point into this issue. *Digital Other* uses an investigation of digital technology to remark on interiority but also uses the distinction between digital and analog to parallel two kinds of formulations of difference. This section clarifies what I mean by “digital” and explains how I use this idea to suggest that the viewer of my work is quite different from the Other depicted in the work itself. I understand a digital difference between terms to be a hierarchical comparison, while an analog difference is more like a categorical difference where one term is not greater or less than the other. The art historian and theorist, Meredith Hoy, in her text, *From Point to Pixel: A Genealogy of Digital Aesthetics*, makes the claim that digital aesthetics can be found in any artwork that utilizes a discrete system of quantities (Hoy 26). The digital as a modality, in other words, is not limited to computers and circuitboards, but describes any experience that can be described quantitatively. George Seurat’s pointillist work, “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte” (1884) is digital because it is a grid of different color values if closely inspected. I reference Hoy not to claim for my work a digital aesthetic but instead to say that the experience of other people through the screen is one such kind of digital experience. I mean to borrow her understanding of the digital as computational and apply it to certain kinds of human relations where the Other is felt as data more than as another subjective mind. As I stated in the introduction, *Digital Other* is in some ways an update of the performance art of the 1960’s and 1970’s, but it is also a statement about existing in a digital relation to other people in a way that has always been problematic, but now finds new forms through digital technology.
Lacan’s self/other binary, as an abstraction, is a digital binary: it has no specific content fundamentally, but is instead a distinction between two purely opposed elements. It is more like a quantitative difference where the “ego ideal” is maintained against the Other and not just alongside her. People though are not digital entities and the difference between us has no numerical value. However, to the extent that the self grasps at continuity through an Other, it has formulated itself into a totalized “1” and renders the Other into a “0” counterpart. The self takes analog difference— the material difference between bodies— and renders it computational. The Other goes from qualitatively different and therefore incomparably different to quantitatively different and therefore understandable and possess-able. We quantify the Other in order to locate her so that we can locate ourselves in reality.

When Phelan says, “Each real believes itself to be the Real-real” (Phelan 3), she means that my construction of reality, which operates through the being of the Other, erases the reality of that Other to the extent that the Other escapes my understanding, to the extent
that the Other’s separate existence contradicts the universality of my own. My art projects recognize this digital aspect in myself, but do so in order to acknowledge the viewer’s actual absence in this dynamic: the way the viewer recognizes that she is not actually the Other whom I represent. In no way do I mean to give expression to the way the viewer exceeds my understanding. Instead, my video represents an admission of my blindness when I reach out to the real others who view it. It acknowledges the digitization of the other and owns it as interior, in order to make an affirmation about analog coexistence: a shared inhabiting of the world that is not based on subjective confrontation. The display strategy of the desk, monitor and chair alludes to me as the author of the work and as a particular embodied center of perception, and so opens up to the experience of viewers only as a possibility and not as a necessity. These others are indeed unknown to me, so these videos which represent my own self-relation do not draw an analogy to the self-relation of others. When Phelan says, “In writing the unmarked I mark it, inevitably” (Phelan 27), she gets at the paradoxical nature of confronting the difference in others. To whatever degree I perceive difference, it is a difference that I intuit and possess for myself. I like to think that, in some way, the viewer—in her selfhood—is actually excluded from my work, left to deal with her difference entirely on her own.
Digital Other displays a pretense of digital difference—the superimposition of reciprocity on an unequal relationship—in an analog way. The media theorist, Alexander Galloway, operates with the same understanding as Hoy about the digital; namely, that “1” and “0” make up a purely differential, reciprocal relationship. In Laruelle: Against the Digital, Galloway articulates the profoundly anti-digital philosophy of François Laruelle. Interestingly, Galloway says of Laruelle that his rejection of the digital is a de-quantification that, rather than acknowledging the Other as escaping my understanding, refuses to confront the Other at all (Galloway, 33). Laruelle saw the same contradiction as Phelan, but responds by disengaging from the dialectic of self.

Viewers of my work are intentionally thwarted in their identification with me because I clearly become my own Other in a process of self-extension, at one point performing the same standoffish gaze towards the viewer that the Other in the piece performs towards me. Viewers are, accordingly, not confronted in their selfhood at all since I enact an ontological opposition over a metaphysical union. I mean that my video directly represents a backing-away from the reality of the Other: if the Other whom I symbolize in the piece is affirmed as part of me, the viewer is logically not included in it. I double-down on this backing-away when the plurality of different others—the potentially infinite amount of rooms I might be surveilling—collapse into a single room each time I sit down again at the computer screen. Galloway says of Laruelle that he affirms the “generic”: an immanent singular and self-contained entity (Galloway 34). This generic being, he says, is not a unification of all that is different. It is not then the problematic erasure of difference referred to by Phelan. It is a oneness that is whole without reference to a “0” and that also does not exclude the possibility of others like it, but this is precisely because it does not even touch those others. I want to argue that my piece performs a similar affirmation, but the key for me is that the self-sufficiency of this “1” is reserved for the Other, not for myself. I am haunted and bisected by the Other since she is
perpetually getting between me and myself. She is, for me, more consistent and cohesive than my own self.
I affirm my subjectivity as an active dialectic in contrast to the objectivity of the Other that I am always symbolizing. The real Other, my logic goes, escapes me entirely. For this reason, the blacked-out Other in the work is an erasure without specific reference. As I have stated elsewhere, it is an erasure that I am owning as interior to me. I display myself as split and engaged in dialectic (I am split by the screen, between myself and the Other) but the real Other of the piece (the viewer) remains entirely intact. The generic then is affirmed in the piece itself in that the difference that lurks within me is for viewers a singularity that does not bisect them. Their presence in front of the screen is an optional analogy to my own since viewers may view my video from a standing position and not choose to engage with it as I engage with the Other in the piece. It is conveyed as an oscillating tension within me as the artist without assuming about how much the viewer experiences the same tension internally.

For Galloway, the digital exists on the level of material, on the level of the “unverifiable real” referenced by Phelan. As a unit of difference, the digital has no content but, again, is purely differential. While for Galloway this is a difference that is everywhere the same, my mission is to problematize an analogy to others whereby their difference to themselves would be like my own difference from myself. I will next contextualize this personal and philosophical position through a debate between Galloway and the media theorist, Wendy Chun. Wendy Chun takes issue with Galloway’s formulation that code is a material Real. For her, it is important that code can never be experienced that way. Where Galloway cautions readers not to understand digital existence as a medium through which reality is disclosed, Chun, in *On Sourcery*, asserts that there is no other way to experience code (Chun, 301). The purely differential distinction of binary code, in other words, is not a difference we can engage in or insert ourselves into. Following Phelan and Lacan, material reality cannot be accessed by symbolism or representation. This is exactly Chun’s point about code. Do not pretend that there is a verifiable real of code, she is warning us, referencing Galloway’s text *Protocol* (Chun 309). Chun’s qualm is not that code is not material really, but rather that we should not view it that way because we cannot. Claiming access to it is the problem, much like claiming
access to the Real is a problem for Phelan. Chun says, “This turn to computer science also threatens to reify knowing software as truth, an experience that is arguably impossible: we all know some software, some programming languages, but does anyone really “know” software? What could this knowing even mean?” (Chun 301). Galloway and Chun are partly in agreement about that material reality has no subjective content and that binary code has no given meaning. I will unpack the nature for their disagreement in order to better stake out my position in *Digital Other*.

It is often said in post-structuralist philosophy that identities are “coded,” which is another way of saying “marked.” Chun herself draws the link between the code of language and the code of computers: “After all, code is, according to the OED [Oxford English Dictionary], ‘a systematic collection or digest of the laws of a country, or of those relating to a particular subject’” (Chun 309). For Galloway, the digital binary is a primary difference: as a distinction with no content, it is itself the quantum building block upon which information is formed. He believes in a generic subject, rather than a particular subject. He understands difference to be everywhere the same, such that we can all converge on the reality of the digital even though it is through a shared way of not seeing it. This commonality between subjects will become more clear in a later discussion about the art duo Jodi. Galloway's belief is a metaphysics: it draws a perimeter around the unknown so as to locate it. Chun, on the other hand, understands difference to be everywhere different. Chun says that source code is fetishized in that we give it a locus, taking something inherently elusive and pretending that it can be grasped. In psychoanalysis, a fetish refers to an object or action that stands in for the radical difference of the Other. It renders a radical difference that we cannot possess and packages it in terms of sameness. By this logic, the difference between me and you is not even the same as the difference between you and me: I wrap your difference from me in my sameness and you wrap my difference from you in your sameness. This is exactly the position I take in my piece. There is no reciprocity and no symmetry here. Phelan puts it, “The proposition that one sees oneself in terms of the other and the other in terms of oneself,
is itself differently marked for men and women” (Phelan 17). She cites the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle to say that the subject and object cannot be located at the same time (Phela, 114). Chun echoes this statement in the realm of code: “Source code thus is arguably symptomatic of human language’s tendency to attribute a sovereign source to an action, a subject to a verb” (309). Galloway, Chun’s statement would indicate, affirms the continuity of the subject and ignores the paradox of change referenced in the first section. In other words, there is no stable “I” for Chun with which to even locate where or how internal difference operates. For Chun this translates into media theory as: there is no stable separation between code and the devices for interpreting code. Digital Other is much more closely aligned with Chun than Galloway in the sense that I am providing a window into the digital structure of myself without embroiling the viewer in that dialectic: I do not compare their difference to themselves with my difference to myself. The digitalness of my work is in my own internal intersubjective structure that I present as an object for the viewer. I address the viewer with an earnest question without making assumptions. If they relate to my piece, it is across a distance that I set up as primary to me. I relate to the viewer in a way so as to leave them intact. The nature of the image (the nature of existing as a self through the Lacanian identification with an image) for me is itself an image: the screen is on a screen. I am trying to make visible the nature of visibility. Chun states: “Code is a medium in the full sense of the word. As a medium, it channels the ghost that we imagine runs the machine—that we see as we don’t see—when we gaze at our screen’s ghostly images” (Chun 310). It is almost precisely this ghost— referenced now by Lacan, Phelan and Chun— that I am displaying. The ghost in the machine exists just as much outside the machine. The interiority of self and the exteriority of the Other (my Other that I externalize and represent) are interdependently defined: the distinction between the two cannot be located through a definition of either one or the other. The same goes for code and device, and for material and medium.
A. Modernism and Post-Structuralism

_Digital Other_ is consistent with a great deal of artwork that addresses the internet’s impact on society and is more about medium than material. Galloway’s understanding of code as material aligns him with modernist art. In modernism, a work has both form and content, both material and signification, and the two terms become fused together. The idea in modernist art, then, is that the material itself communicates. A Jackson Pollock painting for instance does not conceal its form behind what it depicts. What it depicts is partly the paint itself. In Galloway’s e-flux article, _Jodi’s Infrastructure_, he posits that the artist duo Jodi produces uniquely modernist internet art. Indeed, Jodi does not use code to depict. Unlike most internet art, their works push against the user’s experience rather than making it seamless or easy. Visiting jodi.org is like seeing code in operation almost like looking at the cogs and wheels inside an analog clock. The user can only become more conscious that behind her experience is a set of commands that are executed with each click. On the other hand, post-structuralist philosophy understands that signification never immediately gives away its own operation. Much of the art that has responded to the advent of the internet—often termed “Post-Internet Art”—is aligned with post-structuralism: it is concerned with the rapid exchange and turnover of signification that the internet and code allow as media. _Digital Other_ falls more in this latter category. I am commenting on the exchange of information that allows my experience of other people to, at least in moments, entirely miss their real existence. The work does not fuse material and content but sees these as interacting in a perpetual exchange.

Reality, fact, and truth are certainly difficult to locate on the web. In a way, the internet
has compounded this problem of locating meaning by making the speed at which meaning is revised even more dizzying. *Digital Other* is partly a depiction of the old problem of selfhood in the new context of the web, but also specifically addresses the web as reinvigorating this problem and creating an even more dizzying kind of self-relation. In works like “I-Be AREA” (2007), Ryan Trecartin gives a narrative form to the new ways meaning and identity are mediated. Rosalind Duguid in her review of the piece in *Elephant* says, “I-Be Area is bubbling over with the speech of Twitter and the late Vine. The characters speak fast—their words are heavy with sarcasm, hyperbole and metaphor—and usually with a Southern US twang. Along with a lot of internet humour, it draws massively from the drama and bravado of reality TV drag culture, and also a kind of black humour. It’s about theatre, fantasy, self-presentation and being everyone at once.” My work displays my own disorientation within my identity and assumes the stability of the viewer, effectively flipping the way Trecartin pushes the disorienting search for stable meaning onto the viewer. For me, the supposition of stability is asserted upon the Other, who functions as a ghostly master manipulator just as much as a surveilled object. The surreality emerges in the symbolism of fingers, teeth, and eyes: simultaneously oedipal and pragmatic as the tools I use to integrate myself into the world. Alex Da Corte’s collaborative project with Jayson Musson entitled “Eastern Sports” (2014) is a three-hour video depicting game-like activities played out at half-speed amidst brightly colored patterns and costumes. It is ripe in its colors and ripe for making immediate subconscious associations due to sexual undertones and visual parallels between elements. Steve Basel, in his review for *Title Magazine*, says of the work: “Existential, socio-political and psychological questions are raised in pragmatic, poetic, and twitter-esque language.” Da Corte, in both his video work and his installations, is known for creating hypnotic scenes that seem frozen into a contemplative but somehow commercial or cheaply pleasurable experience. Similar to Da Corte, I use surrealism to bring out the latent in the everyday, but in everyday interactions rather than objects. As previously stated, I do not pursue shared subconscious meanings but instead surface my own subconscious in relation to my own experience. This
experience, in *Digital Other* in particular, is the experience of the computer screen. Similar to both Trecartin and Da Corte, I am interested in the way the web extends and alters our own ego-formation, but my approach is based on an urgently personal destabilization partly exacerbated by my use of digital technology.

**B. Surveillance and the Subconscious**

Phelan, in *Unmarked*, lists some “traps of visibility”: surveillance, fetishism, and voyeurism (Phelan 10). In *Digital Other* I use the computer quite overtly as an instantiation of these traps. Surveillance is one of the most dominant themes in the work and is also the theme that requires the most updating from the performance art of the 1960’s and 1970’s. In this subsection, I explain some of my choices in the project as they relate to surveillance—specifically surveillance in its current form of “Big Data”. While surveillance takes a visual form in my work, it is important to note, before moving forward, that surveillance is any form of monitoring individuals without their direct knowledge. Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, explains that in this postmodern era we, as human subjects, are always opting into our own surveillance. To participate in society is already to—albeit unconsciously—subscribe to a system of control. He says, “Everywhere socialization is measured by exposure to media messages. Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial. Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning homologous to the economic one that results from the accelerated rotation of capital.” (Baudrillard 80). Since the invention of social media, this statement resonates even more. Logging onto Facebook so that I can express my opinion has a very real additional consequence: I am contributing to the vast collection of information that companies use to tailor their services and products. Many of us know this is happening,
but do not know exactly how and also do not really care. These statements clarify my choice of using mock surveillance footage in *Digital Other* the way I have: I mean to communicate that I am complicit in my own socialization. I am offering up myself for surveillance at the same time that I indulge in voyeurism. Gilles Deleuze, in his “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” foresaw the emergence of the web as a way of controlling a population (Deleuze 4). For Deleuze, there is a shift that happened in society when the individual’s self-regulation becomes automated. He says, “The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals,” and masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.” (Deleuze 5). Gerald Raunig, in his text, *Dividuum: Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution*, cites Deleuze and notes a similar shift whereby my individual agency as a single person is circumvented in this latest incarnation of capitalism: “[Machinic Capitalism] concerns the flows passing through these dichotomies and through the single things—data flows, desires, becomings, middles, dancing relations, the in-between of dividual society” (Raunig 110). In *Digital Other*, the computer screen represents the medium of these flows. The loss of fingers, eyes, and teeth through this medium symbolize not only a loss of agency but also a breaking apart of myself into smaller units. If we sell ourselves online, we do so in chunks. When I “like” something on social media and then this information is sold by Google and subsequently used to form a commercial demographic, my conscious self is not being consulted. Instead, Raunig is saying, capitalism can access my desires closer to their source in the subconscious.

The art duo, “Sisters of the Lattice” have a similar interest in the internet as a manifestation of the subconscious. Their work revolves around themes of the interconnectivity of selves and an affirmation of coexistence through the web as medium. Their website says, “The Sisters of the Lattice are willfully conjoined techno-mystics who work to deepen the connection between individuals and the technological devices they use everyday.” In works such as “Forever Grateful for Your Solicitation,” the artists bring
embodiment to the forefront of digital engagement, asking participants within a sweat-lodge to clear their devices of accumulated digital junk (“spam”), effectively comparing bodily cleansing to the digital elimination of data. The body, we are left to conclude, is not separated from its environment, be it analog or digital. My reference to the subconscious in my own work are the fingers, eyes, and teeth which are psychologically potent symbols for me and are often a prominent feature in my dreams. They function as both icons for pieces of my body and as surreal images that are as phallic and oedipal and comically Freudian. The passage through the screen between me and the Other is thus a passage from surreality to hyperreality. It would make sense then that the 2-dimensional screen abstractly stands in as the Real. A screen exists as a screen in as much as it reveals some other place, but is not itself that other place. The Real is the possibility of representation but is no representation in particular. And, like Phelan asserts, it is not neutral but is covertly gendered.
A. Lacan, Levinas and Irigaray

Emmanuel Levinas was a continental Jewish philosopher who, along with other prominent philosophers in the 1960s, responded to the fascism that had spread in Europe in the early part of that 20th century. He called out fascism's dangerously universal claims and narratives which foreclosed the reality of the Other. In *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, he said, “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity” (Levinas 51). Elsewhere Levinas refers to this “challenge” as the “face-to-face.” His position that the Other challenges me to my core, essentially bisecting my very sense of self, is one that clearly resonates with my project.

One of the concerns driving *Digital Other* is how the computer screen mediates and complicates the “face-to-face.” I ask the question: am I exposed to the inexplicable and raw difference of the Other when their face is shown to me on a screen and not in an embodied form? Instead of definitively answering this question in the work, I instead pose it to the viewer through the ambiguous positioning of the Other. The fact that the Other confronts me, the subject, across a situation of surveillance is meant to suggest the perseverance of the Other despite the control and power implied by the screen and camera shots. In a chapter from *Levinas and Lacan: The Missed Encounter* called, “The Subject and the Other in Levinas and Lacan,” Paul-Laurent Assoun notes the overlapping concern of Levinas and Lacan but also tries to locate the difference in their two lines of thought. Without delving into the nuances of Assoun’s argument, it is enough to say that Levinas stakes out an ethical position that revalues
the Other while Lacan revalues the authenticity of the Subject (Assoun 82). Both start with
the idea that the Other gets filtered into terms that the subject can understand and with the idea
that the subject has that Other as part of its being. Interestingly, this leads Levinas to approach
the Other anew, cautioning us not to over-identify with the Other at the expense of forgetting
the Other’s difference. Lacan is more concerned with the structure of the Other’s presence
within the Self as it is enforced through inherited symbols (the already-engendered system of
visibility that we are born into). He therefore sees an earnest evaluation of one’s desires to be
imperative.

Positioning myself between these two thinkers, I wanted my video project to allude
to ethical concerns. The real Other in my piece is the viewer, while the symbolized Other is
the figure marked/erased by blackness. We live in a time when our connectedness is taken for
granted and when actions are severed from their context, when memes are circulated without
knowing their origin. I believe this pushes the second person (“you”) always already into the
position of a third person (“they”). The raw presence of the Other is subverted according to
the web’s dominating ubiquity, so that the real Other and myself are not grounded in a shared
environment due to the lurking possibility of the screen. It’s not just that we are often lost in
our devices, but that the possibility of mediation haunts even unmediated experiences.

This gesture that I enact in the work finds clarification through the writing of Luce Irigaray,
who uses psychoanalysis to critique Levinas. My video, as a gesture, resembles what Irigaray
calls the “caress,” which is even more primary than the “face-to-face.” It questions or invites
the Other even before the formulation that there are two distinct people who might potentially
interact: “This gesture, which is always and still preliminary to and in all nuptials, which
weds without consum(mat)ing, which perfects while abiding by the outlines of the other,
this gesture may be called: the touch of the caress” (Irigiray 120). It is an embodied gesture
that acknowledges a basic material coexistence even more primary than the coexistence of
subjectivities (Irigiray 120). For me, what makes this possible in Digital Other is the position
of the viewers. They are witness to the same screen as myself such that an implicit question
emerges: do I and the viewer have a basis for relation? While not “a caress” in the strict sense of bodily invitation, I understand my own project to be a reaching out through a display of my own back-end operations. The humor of the piece is in the awkward invitation of viewers into my inner workings, where real Others do not normally belong in the context of daily interaction.
Digital Other was inspired by the preceding ideas and was also a way for me to process these ideas through art and through my personal experience and subject position. I wanted to display the question of the Other but also to instantiate the Other as I experience it. I took this doubled task of abstraction and personal expression and matched it, as I tend to do, with my doubled appearance in the video. In one way, the video depicts myself and the Other. In another way, it depicts just two versions of my self. The tension between these two formulations is precisely the tension I meant to show in the piece. The real Other—the viewer—is ambiguously addressed as the same as me and as different from me. The viewer gets to decide the degree of relation and the degree to which the difference that haunts me also haunts them. Digital Other is a piece that both addresses contemporary social issues and includes personal introspection and personal content. As I articulated in the section on critical theory, the work responds to the way internet culture subverts authentic engagement with others and distracts from genuine self-examination. Internet platforms and social media allow us to avoid actually living with ourselves. The dual aspect of Digital Other allows me to critically engage with this problem but also re-insert myself as subject into a dynamic that which typically buries authentic subjectivity under so many layers of mediation that it is no longer recognizable. I combined my interest in psychoanalysis, feminism, media theory, critical theory, and philosophy in my approach to this project and self-applied these modes of inquiry in order to enact a particular formulation of the binaries that play out in my interior life. It is important for me that this self-application artistically resolves this problematic formulation as a personal gesture. The project is critically responsive to a contemporary situation but also, and more importantly, affirms myself as a desiring subject in a context where a desiring gaze can typically hide behind the screen. The video takes that
entire situation of the screen— as a medium through which desire and power plays out— and displays it on a screen.


