

ROLE PLAY

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From its inception, photography has examined the notion of self, of being, of “other”—whether through portraiture, self-portraiture, reportage, narrative, or a more conceptual approach. Since the early 20th century, projects engaging role play have further contemplated identity, liberating artists to gender-bend and time-travel and envision their selves in myriad ways, in turn reflecting on their very *is-ness*—even when that is in flux. An alter ego, persona, or avatar may be aspirational; it may relate to one’s personal and cultural history and sense of otherness; it may be a form of activism, or a means of maneuvering through entrenched, even polarized positions, toward empathy: putting oneself in another’s shoes. That remaking of the self is a theme that continues to beckon, and the medium has evolved in a way commensurate with this fascination, embracing video, online gaming, social media platforms such as Instagram, and other innovative contexts for role play, all reinforcing our selves-obsession.

Meriem Bennani contextualizes her family members in a disastrous, data-spilled future, while Bogosi Sekhukhuni simulates a relationship with his estranged father, in the process insisting that the viewer ruminate on technology’s ability to affect human emotions. Darius Mikšys delves into what role play in online gaming reveals about our own nature, while Cao Fei looks at cosplay as an avenue for escaping alienation. Beatrice Marchi also ponders marginalization and the complexities of character, through her “alters” or “friends” (as she calls them).

Traveling back in time, Juno Calypso visits a mid-20th-century mansion—an avatar for a family’s apocalyptic and existential fears. Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley also turn to the past, with their particular take on Titian’s painting *The Rape of Europa* (1560–62), evoking through film two parallel worlds—mythological (Europa’s) and historical—while addressing the subjugation and exploitation of women in the process. Meanwhile, Narcissister, in her ongoing effort to liberate the female body from oppressive forces, celebrates a woman’s right to bare her breasts in public.

Role play not only scrutinizes but may also upend conventional representations of gender, ethnicity, and class. Haruka Sakaguchi and Griselda

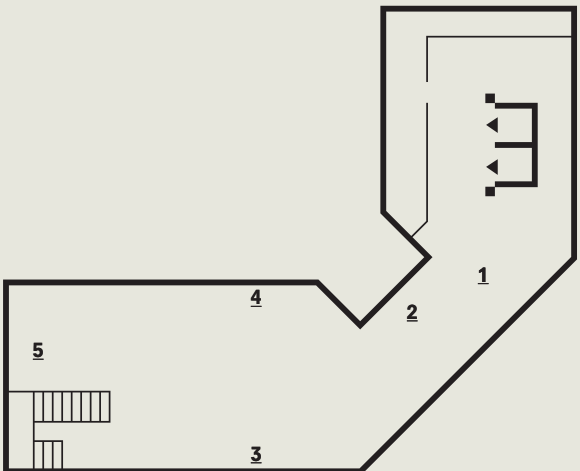
San Martin comment on the reductive “stock” types still perpetuated by the entertainment industry in the United States, while Tomoko Sawada tries on thirty different characters—potential wives for potential husbands—riffing on the Japanese matchmaking tradition of *omiai*. Amalia Ulman also has investigated stereotyping by taking on various personae and posting ever-evolving images of herself on Instagram in what was ultimately revealed to be a performance. But to her followers it felt “true,” despite, or perhaps because of, the context.

Content. Context. Authenticity. You will find yourself suffused in blue—a light installation conceived by Random Studio to subdue the visual “white noise” of architectural influences and intensify the viewer’s connection to each project. This creates an alter ego for the Osservatorio that is inescapably present yet entirely about absence, in its obscuring of the particulars intrinsic to the space—its identity.

Who am I? Who would I like to be? How do people see me? Whose life would I like to inhabit, understand more deeply, if only for a moment? Am I being authentic to my true self?

“Role Play” invites you to reflect on these questions as you bathe in the transformative light, joining the artists in their explorations of being, reimagined.

FIFTH FLOOR



1. CAO FEI

Transformed into video-game heroes by elaborate disguises, young Chinese people move through the streets of their nation's major cities, creating surreal existential and sociological landscapes.

In the works of Cao Fei (Guangzhou, 1978; lives and works in Beijing) the fantastic meets the real, infusing magic into a disenchanting depiction of contemporaneity. In her works, the artist embraces elements from contemporary Chinese popular culture in an investigation of the continuous changes in which subcultures evolve. The characters in this video attempt to unite the two worlds in which they live: on one hand, the comforting, alienating, and inventive universe of video games, and on the other, their tangible existence. Through "cosplaying," they come into contact during moments of reality.

Cosplayers, 2004

Single-channel video, color, sound, 9'12"

Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space and Sprüth Magers

2. DARIUS MIKŠYS

In different screenshots, *A Piece of Peace* records the process conducted by Darius Mikšys (Kaunas, 1969; lives and works in Vilnius) to create a group portrait of the player-warriors in the online game Halo. While the game often entails the creation of alternative identities that have a particular purpose, in his work Mikšys asks the participants (whom he does not know) to temporarily put aside their aggressive alter egos and to strike a pose. In his practice, Mikšys often acts in the first person, setting in motion projects in which reality and fiction are testbeds for different concepts, one of which is identity.

A Piece of Peace, 2006

Digital print mounted on aluminum

Variable dimensions

Courtesy ERMES ERMES

3. BOGOSI SEKHUKHUNI

Bogosi Sekhukhuni's (Johannesburg, 1991; lives and works in Johannesburg) piece imagines a technological simulation to take the place of the artist's relationship with his estranged father, as part of his ongoing investigation of human consciousness in a digitally networked age. Representing an actual Facebook chat, each monitor features an animated, talking avatar, whose voice "reads" the dialogue aloud in robotic sound.

Sekhukhuni is engaged in works that allow for an exploration of the role online forums and technology play in "reimagining our identity." In doing so, he addresses the interaction between identity and consumption.

Consciousness Engine 2: absentblackfatherbot, 2014

Dual-channel video, 3'31"

Courtesy of the artist

4. JUNO CALYPSO

In Nevada, Juno Calypso (London, 1989; lives and works in London) discovered an underground house built during the

Cold War by a millionaire who lived there with his wife, a complete Las Vegas home with a pink bathroom, chandeliers, and swimming pool—8 meters underground. She gained access to the house after many months of talking to the caretaker on Facebook. The photographer even stayed down there a few nights: as Calypso began her stay, sleeping and working alone downstairs, she immersed herself in the surroundings of the underground house and staged self-portraits in the different rooms. From right to left, from top to bottom:

Subterranean Kitchen, 2017
Archival pigment print

A Clone of Your Own, 2017
Archival pigment print

Die Now, Pay Later, 2018
Archival pigment print

How Much Life Is Enough?, 2018
Archival pigment print

Erotic Nightmares, 2018
Archival pigment print

Immortal Bodies, 2018
Archival pigment print

A Cure for Death, 2018
Archival pigment print

Tuesday in Eternity, 2018
Archival pigment print

All artworks are courtesy of the artist and TJ Boulting

5. MERIEM BENNANI

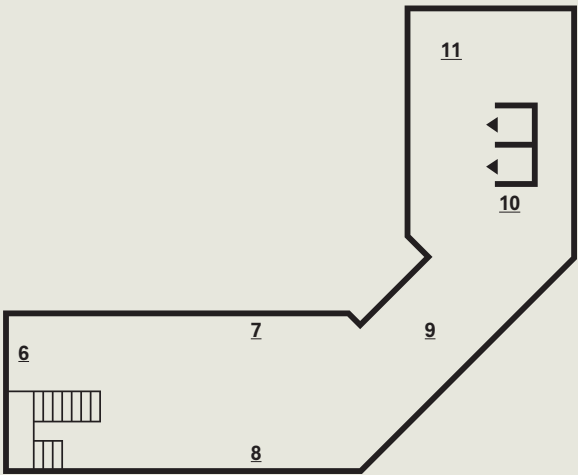
As is often the case in her practice, in this work Meriem Bennani (Rabat, 1988; lives and works in New York City) playfully blends humor and critique, weaving an expanded allegory for how media circulates through channels of digital and geopolitical power, both online and in the real spaces we inhabit, thus challenging our idea of a fixed identity. The same challenge of identity is proposed to the participants in her videos (nonprofessional actors), who are given prompts like: “Pretend you are on an island in the future.” She then exaggerates their physicality through 3D animations and mixes them with cartoon co-actors.

The island called CAPS is a place in the middle of the Atlantic that began as a detention camp for arrested teleporters, migrants swatted from the sky by American Troopers and held there to await processing. This video is the “guided tour” of a spill that occurred there, a disaster of data leaking out into the water, a streaming rupture.

Guided Tour of a Spill (CAPS Interlude), 2021
4K single-channel digital video, 15'49”

Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery

SIXTH FLOOR



6. HARUKA SAKAGUCHI AND GRISELDA SAN MARTIN

Typecast Project by Haruka Sakaguchi (Osaka, 1973; lives and works in New York City) and Griselda San Martin (Barcelona, 1978; lives and works in New York City), originally conceived as a website, has the goal of analyzing and visualizing “what Hollywood gets wrong about race and ethnicity,” as the subtitle of the project states. Starting from the assumption that lack of diversity in cast lists is one of the deepest-rooted and most current problems in the film industry, the two photographers asked a group of actors what their ideal role would be. The comparison between the stereotypical characters they are usually asked to play and their ideal roles, which the photographers illustrated in photographic portraits of the actors, creates the equivalent of a satire of the entertainment industry.

Typecast Project, 2019

Digital slide show

Courtesy of the artists

7. AMALIA ULMAN

Amalia Ulman (Buenos Aires, 1989; lives and works in Argentina) used her social media profiles to stage a five-month scripted performance inspired by extreme makeover culture. Between April and September 2014 she posted on her Instagram account a series of pictures and selfies seemingly documenting her everyday life. This series of pictures, however, as she later revealed, did not depict her “real” life but constituted an art piece: through her banal lifestyle shots, Ulman’s persona lived a dramatic story arc of female stereotypes.

The project does not use social media to disseminate images of a work that is something else, but arose within it based on the dynamics of self-representation elicited by Instagram.

Excellences and Perfections—New Installation,
2015–22

C-type print, video, frame

Courtesy of the artist and Deborah Schamoni

8. TOMOKO SAWADA

In order to create *OMIAI*♡, Tomoko Sawada (Kobe, 1977; lives and works in Kobe) transformed herself into thirty different characters with the help of costumes, wigs, and makeup, and even managed to change her weight. The portraits she had taken of herself imitate the photographs provided in the traditional Japanese custom of *omiaï*: when arranged marriages are being prospected, the parents of potential spouses exchange photographs of their children that offer a distinguished and reassuring appearance.

In her work, Sawada explores the relationship between the inner life and the outer image of individuals, while enacting continuous alterations to her own figure and face. A feminist who is also active as a performer, she describes herself as a photographer who does not shoot: in the case of this series, she had her portraits taken by a studio specializing in prewedding photos.

OMIAI♡, 2001

Set of 30 chromogenic prints

Courtesy of the artist

9. BEATRICE MARCHI

Reflecting on the figure of the clown as a stereotypical yet also graceful representation of the human being, Beatrice Marchi (Gallarate, 1986; lives and works in Berlin) has created a series of characters in her practice: these include, among others, Loredana, the maid with claws, Mafalda, a humanized dog, and Susi Kulinski, interested in sex and endowed with eyes on her butt.

Marchi's participation in "Role Play" revolves around the story of Katie Fox, one of the artist's avatars, a character plagued by a moral question that divides her between being good and being evil in her relationship with others. Since her appearance in the artist's production, this figure has experienced a character development: the nastiness she showed as a successful teenager led her to find herself relegated to the fringes of social life. In her current phase, Katie faces adulthood filled with doubts about the need to accept compromises in her behavior. During a performance in the exhibition, Katie's Christmas tree is decorated with the help of Katie's band, "The Friends," consisting of her alter egos, who have gathered to support Katie in the realization of her dream: to celebrate Christmas—a day when the divisions between good and bad are forgotten—every day. Together with the tree, a video is shown in which Katie, who is looking for a place to sleep, meets a turtle that has turned nasty since its shell was accidentally shattered.

Katie's New Friend, 2022

Christmas tree, blanket, bracelets, lamp, cable,
necklaces, paper

Part of the performance *Katie, the Friends and Christmas*, 2022

Katie, the Friends and Christmas, 2022
Performance, Osservatorio, February 17–18, 2022

When Katie Fox Met the Evil Turtle, 2022
HD video with digital animations, 9'50"

All artworks are courtesy of the artist and SANDY BROWN,
Berlin

10. NARCISSISTER

The artist and activist Narcissister, whose true identity is unknown to the public, always wears a mask in her works. The two films presented, which play in a loop, are representative of her practice, to which the trailer for *Organ Player* provides an introduction, showing her approach to exploring issues of gender, racial identity, and sexuality. In the more recent *Breast Work*, Narcissister focuses on women's right to go topless in public. Control over the female body is a theme that the artist investigates, avoiding recognition of her own face by wearing a mask. She started to wear it in 2007 as a way to communicate ideas of what it means to be a woman, an artist, and a person of color without commenting on what she refers to as the "narrow confines" of her personal experience.

Narcissister Organ Player Trailer, 2018
Video, 2'19"

Narcissister Breast Work, 2019
Video, 9'

Narcissister Masks, 2007–21
6 plastic masks

All artworks are courtesy of the artist

11. MARY REID KELLEY AND PATRICK KELLEY

In an imaginary dialogue with Titian's *The Rape of Europa*, Mary Reid Kelley (Greenville, South Carolina, 1979; lives and works in Olivebridge, New York) and Patrick Kelley (Minneapolis, 1969; lives and works in Olivebridge, New York) have produced a video in which painting, performance, poetry, and satire are fused to create a new and updated version of the myth narrated by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Starting from the understanding that Ovid's account gives a romanticized view of sexual violence, the artists reinvent it, taking a feminist perspective. In the graphic and fairytale set created by Patrick Kelley, in a blend of comedy and tragedy, Mary Reid Kelley interprets a series of female characters from classical antiquity, freeing them from the silent and subjugated roles in which they have been represented over the centuries.

Rape of Europa, 2021
High definition video with stereo audio, 9'7"
Courtesy of the artists

These are the words by Europa:

It looks like the bleeding has stopped, said Europa, sanguinely.

But I'm all sticky, Europa twiggled.
A tampon would be great, Europa plugged.
Where did these leaves come from? said Europa, off the top of her head.
Hope I'm not pregnant, Europa kidded.
This is a dumb kind of city, Europa stated.
Do I smell patchouli? shouted Europa, incensed.
Is this some kind of an inquest? said Europa, testily.
I'm actually a lawyer, said Europa, briefly.
I'm originally from Turkey, said Europa, gravely.
But I've forgotten about all that, said Europa, obliviously.
You're bringing a lot of negative energy, Europa charged.
Give me that, said Europa, appropriately.
I don't eat carbs, Europa yammered.
I'm lactose intolerant, Europa yakked.
I don't eat mollusks either, Europa clamored.
Women invented beer, said Europa, stoutly.
Women invented agriculture, said Europa, cornily.
I'm gluten-free, Europa wheedled.
Women invented string, said Europa, craftily.
I've never heard of her, said Europa, deftly.
I don't like this subject, Europa objected.
She sounds like a pervert, Europa deviated.
I'd really like to support your work, said Europa, patronizingly.
But I don't think your language is helpful, Europa dictated.
What about me, said Europa, eurocentrically.
I don't want to be a mom, Europa muttered.
You must be my host, Europa guessed.
You must be my kidnapper, said Europa, captivatingly.
I know it was you, said Europa, bullishly.
How many times did it happen? Europa held forth.
I'm pretty sure I can leave whenever I want, said Europa, cagily.
I need a doctor, Europa quacked.
I wish I could turn into a tree, Europa barked.
I hate my own feelings, Europa moored.
Get me a bicycle, Europa spoke.
Get me a horse! Europa nagged.
Get me a rowboat! Europa ordered.
I am a victim, Europa butchered.
You're really an inspiration, Europa mused.
You're the world's tiniest violin, Europa fretted.
This is all your fault, Europa erupted.
I've missed three periods, Europa recounted.
Who knows what's in there, Europa insinuated.
Probably probably twins twins, Europa repeated.

**FONDAZIONE PRADA
OSSERVATORIO**

**Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II,
20121 Milan**

OPENING DAYS AND TIMES

Mon, Fri: 2 pm–8 pm

Sat, Sun: 11 am–8 pm

Closed on Tuesdays

**The ticket desk remains open until
30 minutes before closing time**

Information

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**ROLE PLAY
OSSERVATORIO
19.2–27.6.2022**