

“I got 99 performances and Facebook ain’t the only one”

The Musical Persona Revisited: music performance and self-staging on social media

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Over the past decade, social media has taken centre stage in our daily lives, affecting almost every aspect of contemporary society, including the prominence of digital technologies in the field of Performance Studies (Bay-Cheng 39). Nevertheless, social media itself as a performance platform has only been addressed superficially from a theatre and/or performance studies perspective. The importance of digital technologies is mostly considered either in relation to how they are introduced onto the classical theatre stage, or within the debate on performance documentation. The intrinsic value of social media as a platform for performance has not been thoroughly tackled yet. This is probably due to the long and ongoing debate regarding the notions of *liveness* and ephemerality which still dominate the field of performance. (Auslander, *Liveness*, 40) Even though performance studies certainly show a heightened interest in social media, its omnipresence still appears to be largely neglected in favour of the generally-accepted *conditio sine qua non* of theatre: physical presence. In relation to the performance of music, the live shows still seem to be considered the most legitimate focus of research, neglecting the plenitude of musical marginalia on the World Wide Web contributing to our experience of (popular) music.

The discourse rendering social media as the mere practice of superficial entertainment and a triviality needs to be counteracted. In this article I want to highlight the performative potential of, specifically, those music artists playing with theatrical presence on social media in a way that challenges conventional spectacle qualities. Within this framework, the new stage that has been introduced by twenty-first century social media will be the central focus, potentially creating a virtual space in direct dialogue with the actual public space. Using three illustrations from different backgrounds – the American hip-hop artist and queer symbol Mykki Blanco, pop princess Lana del Rey and New-Zealand indie artist Connan Mockasin - I want to point out how the tension between the *staged performances* of musical personae and the *performed stage* of social media demands investigation. By taking a closer look at these two phenomena, I will argue that the performative weight of the musical persona



Fig. 1. Boston and Dobsyn in *Connan Mockasin*,
Con Conn was Impatient (0:15) and (2:54)



Fig. 2. Boston and Dobsyn in Connan Mockasin,
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proliferates beyond the live show. Musical persona performance on social media platforms can no longer be neglected from a performance studies perspective. First, I will take a look at the umbrella term 'persona', in order to dissect it specifically in terms of social media and music performance. Second, I will build on theatre scholar Charlotte Gruber's research about performing virtual spaces and bring it into contact with performances of music artists on social media. In addition, I will draw a parallel with the Foucauldian concept of the heterotopia, which will conclude my thoughts on the dual nature of online musical persona performance, as I aim to introduce a framework necessary to help comprehend the current ubiquity of selfies, videoclips and Instagram-posts in the specific context of music performance beyond the live show.

Performing a persona

Connan Mockasin is an indie artist who creates a visually and musically alienating universe by applying different forms of theatricality in his oeuvre. In October 2018 he released *Jassbusters*: an album made by a fictive band of music teachers. The way Mockasin implements a fictional narrative and accompanying characters aligns closely with the notion of a concept album, which became very popular during the last decennia of the twentieth century in rock music. Entire albums were set up as visual spectacles, very similar to the narration characterizing operas and other forms of musical theatre. Interestingly enough, Mockasin goes even further and starts playing with the phenomenon of the concept album on a meta-level.

The album culminates in an absurd melodrama in five parts called *Bostyn 'n Dobsyn*: the names of two characters which were introduced by means of video fragments posted on YouTube and Instagram prior to the release of the new album. Mockasin himself plays the role of lead guitarist Bostyn in the orange-hued 80s universe of music teachers, who have a band of their own. The main storyline then revolves around the rather bizarre infatuation of this music teacher with his pupil Dobsyn, who he mistakes for a girl (Fig. 1 and 2). The structure of the concerts during the *Jassbusters* tour was quite remarkable and innovative in that it was divided into three parts. The show begins with the movie *Bostyn 'n Dobsyn*, continuing with a live concert by *Jassbusters*, then finishing off with a gig by Connan Mockasin. All these three parts of the one-show event are creations of one and the same artist. More recently a YouTube video of Connan Mockasin doing a record signing session as Mr. Bostyn at the alternative record label and shop Rough Trade in London was also released.¹ All of these different

appearances belong to the same entity that is Connan Mockasin.

The most obvious precedent staging similarly curious shows was the rock star David Bowie who, as an artist, repeatedly introduced the technique of inserting a conflicting and autobiographical framework into his performances (Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock* 114). A lesser-known example, which particularly highlights the endless possibilities present in this early-mediatised time frame is the French artist Serge Gainsbourg. In 1971 Gainsbourg released the concept album *Histoire de Melody Nelson*, a loosely woven story about a tumultuous, tragic and surrealistic love story between an older man – Gainsbourg himself – and a teenage girl called Melody, played by his muse and model Jane Birkin. The couple's real life relationship was a hot topic in French media at the time. Despite not performing any live shows in a classic concert format at the time, Gainsbourg was very present in terms of performance: he regularly animated the entire country during appearances on television shows. He also created a visionary film accompanying the album *Histoire de Melody Nelson*, which was broadcast just once during prime-time television (Fig. 3 and 4). The way different public appearances of Gainsbourg's personality and persona combined into something that can be recognized as an overall performance, is what Philip Auslander calls a 'musical persona'. Although the musical persona is still highly relevant, the concept needs to be seriously updated in the current media climate.

In his approach, Performance Studies pioneer Philip Auslander makes it very clear that the music is not the only the crux of the artistic practice of a music performer. The presentation of a persona is the most important element of performance (*Kunstlicht* 69). In more recent research Michael Waugh also elaborates on the weight of personae in contemporary music performance in the online realm. In his analysis, he concludes that (post-internet) music, as Auslander also previously pointed out, embraces much more than just *sound*, even though it remains the starting point of most artists (247). Despite the fact that the merging of performance and music is clearly to be situated at the intersection of theatre studies and musicology, Auslander still notes a certain reluctance by a variety of scholars towards actual engagement with these sorts of performances. He acknowledges how this mix of two artistic disciplines is usually considered from a more sociological or ethnographic angle – where the accent shifts from creation to audience reception (*Performance Analysis* 3).



Fig. 3. Serge Gainsbourg with Melody Nelson in Serge Gainsbourg, *Histoire de Melody Nelson* (13 : 46) and (10 :19)



Fig. 4. Serge Gainsbourg with Melody Nelson in
Serge Gainsbourg, *Histoire de Melody Nelson*
(13 :46) and (10 :19)

Another striking example of the importance that online presence has gained in the context of music performance, is the way composer and sound artist Holly Herndon talks about the impossibility of disconnecting American rapper Mykki Blanco's music from his overall online presence:

Your online presence can be part of a greater artistic gesture. An example of this is someone like Mykki Blanco. ... I don't even think he's released an album yet, but he releases all these videos and has an amazing Instagram account and is super active on social media. . . . All of this other stuff creates his whole practice. Another example would be Lil B. The idea of a Lil B album doesn't capture everything that he is. There's the 'cooking dance,' the Twitter beef, all of this other stuff that creates his whole practice. I'm looking at that a little bit. (Rogers)

The availability of the social media platforms Herndon refers to extensively expands the total performance practice of a persona. In his article focusing on *digital queering* and post humanism, Waugh advocates the consideration of the entire online self-representation of an artist (247). In hindsight, *Histoire de Melody Nelson* can be considered an early example of an artist playing with media where fiction and life already continuously infect each other. Parallel to this, Connan Mockasin's complex three-part live performance becomes a reflection on the way this self-staging of musicians has proliferated exponentially. Mockasin playfully delves further into an increasingly complicated question: where does the reality of the music performer end and the creative process of the artistic persona start?

A representation of self within the discursive domain of music?

Auslander has been working on the concept of persona in the context of theatre for more than thirty years. The basic definition describes a musical persona as a "performed presence that is neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer's "real" identity" (*Musical Personae* 102). The persona concept has a broad theatrical history, linked to the use of theatre props and sound-enhancing masks that help the enhancing of certain emotions in ancient Greek theatres (Allport 27). One of the founders of the recently-established research group Persona Studies, David Marshall emphasizes how the broader definition of the word that he introduces (touching upon domains such as marketing or sociology) points out two crucial aspects of personae. By highlighting how a persona is the work of both the voice of the actor and the

mask, he shows how authenticity - the reality of the performer so to speak- and the artistically created construction, are entangled (Making Intellectual Room for Persona Studies 5-6).

David Marshall and Kim Barbour established this research domain of Persona Studies because they observed a proliferation of the “publicization of the self” (*Mapping the Proliferation of the Public Self* 154). A decade ago, Auslander was one of the first to demand more attention for the persona within the context of theatre studies, advocating the need for “a performer-centred theory of musical performance” (*Musical Personae* 103). He called it a form of non-conventional acting, something that essentially links together performance art and music. (*Kunstlicht* 63). The dynamic he pinpoints and which follows the shift to a sociological approach of a performance-based subject, is the fact that he, contrary to others who have engaged with the performance aspect of music performance, not only focuses on self-expression, but explains himself in terms of self-presentation (*Musical Personae* 103). Persona Studies as an academic discipline relies precisely on this point of view.

Auslander concurrently points out how the musical persona embraces several levels in his division between a real performing persona and a created persona: the fictional body. Meanwhile he also introduces the fictional body as a changeable entity during the performance of certain tracks, which he conceptualizes as the “song character” (*Performance Analysis* 11). Ultimately, however, his categorization remains rather rigid. Although Auslander created quite a comprehensive schematization concerning the intertwining of different genre conventions and possible personae, it is difficult to transfer this framework to contemporary musical persona performances spread out across different (social media) platforms. Likewise, the unique position of personae within the field of music studies has been picked up in a recent edition of the Persona Studies journal, even though, remarkably, most authors only briefly touch on social media performance in their essays.

An illustration of how this model does not cover the contemporary complex context of persona-performance is the way Mockasin presents the figure of Don Dicaprio. Mockasin’s take on American actor Leonardo DiCaprio appears within the context of his second album *Caramel*, but also exists as a stand-alone performance. There are several amateur videos on YouTube featuring the impersonation of this actor. He appears as a cameo in his sultry videoclip for *I’m*

The Man That Will Find You and features in an interview where Mockasin interviews himself performing a caricature of the actor. His gimmick requires only a few facial expressions, a baseball cap and some mumbling. Making a direct connection between Mockasin's performance of Don DiCaprio and his musical legacy might seem like a very futile movement, nevertheless it is crucial to understanding the whole of Mockasin's artistic practice and his characteristic performance-aesthetics. He performs in a place where alienation and marginality reign; Don DiCaprio is just another facet partaking of that parallel world.

A large variety of other examples could be placed alongside this embodiment of a character on different levels, but Mockasin also has the tendency to profile himself as 'Conch' on other social media platforms. By doing this, he brings in a layer of digital language to his persona in a very ironic way that once again complicates Auslander's schematization. Although his Twitter-profile seems to be intended for the promotion of his music and concerts, he displays a number of quite remarkable performative actions closely related to what language philosopher John Austin termed the 'performative utterance' (6). He changes his usual tone of self-promotion as well as the channel for his direct contact with fans into something that resists categorization, revealing the performativity at stake (Fig. 5).

An even more recent example which veers into the same direction is that of the YouTube sensation Timothy Gonzales who became an internet sensation in 2018 under the moniker of Jimothy Lacoste. Jimothy entered the scene with homemade music videos that he posted on YouTube, which were characterized by "his trademark hip wiggle in a succession of primary-coloured slacks" (Samways). Besides the colour palette of the personal style that makes up his DIY-musician persona, the traces of digital words that he leaves behind also play an important role within the overall set-up of his persona (Fig. 6). He regularly uses the catchphrase "LIGQE": an abbreviation of "Life is Getting Quite Exciting". As a youngster who grew up in the streets of London without much stability and surrounded by rich children, he appropriates this sort of motivational speech to build his own universe where he focuses on making a career and building a successful future for himself. Such (digital) statements are yet another element contributing to Jimothy's world of groovy dance moves and flashy designer items which clearly stand out from the classic script of rap music and street style.



Fig. 5. @ConnanMockasin. *Twitter*, 26 December 2015, 7:51 a.m.
<https://twitter.com/connanmockasin/status/680642047347310596>



Fig. 6. @jimoethylacoste. People get frustrated when they see us using clothes as art. Link in bio #ExpressUrself."

Instagram, 28 September 2018.

www.instagram.com/p/BoRvfWileJA/

The online musical persona in an *Age of Performance*

The online musical persona deserves particular attention in an age where performance is being labelled by thinkers such as John McKenzie as being one of the most pervasive phenomena of our time (176). Although the idea of online musical personae has occasionally cropped up in specific literature, in most cases it is being used to work on persona appearances in explicitly virtual worlds that are no longer connected with music performance on an actual stage. Ethnomusicologist Trevor S. Harvey, for example, uses the concept of online musical personae to write about artists performing in the virtual world of the online game *Second Life* (181). This is not the equivalent of what I situate under the label of musical persona, because I believe it is crucial to include and investigate the connection with classic live shows which have certainly not disappeared. I do not assert the existence of a radical opposition between online performance on the one hand, and artists performing during a live show on the other. Rather than supplanting the classic conception of a live show by musicians, I want to suggest how online performance becomes an essential element within a total assemblage in Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) sense, taking into account "complex configurations that are heterogeneous, transitory, and fluid" (O'Neill, 84).

This is partly connected to the ever-complicated definition of notions such as 'theatricality' and 'performativity'. Based on the foundations created by Judith Butler in relation to gender performativity and John Austin's performative utterances, performance philosopher Teemu Paivolainen describes their oscillating character as:

(..) metaphors of human existence, the idioms of theatricality and performativity both fluctuate between values of novelty and normativity: theatricality, between the essence of an art form and a cultural value variously opposed or embraced, performativity, between doing and dissimulation. (172)

Paivolainen's assumption reappears in the main argument following feminist musicologist Sheila Whiteley's analysis of American pop star Taylor Swift. In *Exploitation and Constructions*, she focusses on the SM-references in the work of mainstream pop star Taylor Swift. In this specific case she tackles the idea of onstage femininity, which is clearly a magnified version of the role of women in daily life. A performance can only exist because of present performativity: it entails a voluntary movement or act contrasting with the prevalent norm.

Performative elements always rely on repeating and confirming certain social scripts, directly connected to a certain degree of normativity. Despite the SM-references present in Swift's show, Whiteley concludes that Swift does not really contest already-existing frames of reference or representations of women. She denounces it as a mere repetition of already fixed conceptions about the female pop star (18-19). The same critical approach is interesting to extrapolate to other categories of so-called performances including self-staging in the realm of music. It is not unimportant to once again draw attention to the fact that persona practice can be both play as well as possible critique, mirroring the actual difference between theatre and performance.

Yet the online persona cannot be completely disconnected from theatricality in its most traditional sense. Focusing more strongly on the specific circumstances social media introduces, media scholar Zizi Papacharissi sees a direct link in her research between Twitter communication and the conventions of theatre: a written script, symbolism, accessories, requisites, drama and last but not least: an (imaginary) audience (1989). All of these elements play an equally important role in the personae of Mockasin, Lana Del Rey and Mykki Blanco, the case-studies I rely on as interesting exceptions to the neoliberal performance that characterizes the majority of online presences. Precisely the persona as an explicitly theatrical concept simultaneously implying a 'real' presentation of the self, opens up alternatives highlighting the interplay between spectacle and performative potential.

Showing one's true colours: selfies as staged performances

A glance at the already-mentioned examples shows the importance of the social component connected to online performance practices, simultaneously aligning and conflicting with traditional theatre and performance studies frameworks. The contested absence of physical co-presence as a prerequisite is what Marshall depicts as directly connected to the shift from a representational cultural regime to a cultural regime of presentation complicating our use and understanding of media (*Celebrity Persona Pandemic* 5). It not only inherently broaches the notion of persona with the ambiguity between real and artificial, but also with a changed media regime. Gender and music specialist Christa Brüstle emphasizes this duality in *Popfrauen der Gegenwart* when she claims that both voice and body these days function within an entire performance set-up and self-staging strategies (7). A curious example closely related to persona performance these days, is the act of taking selfies²

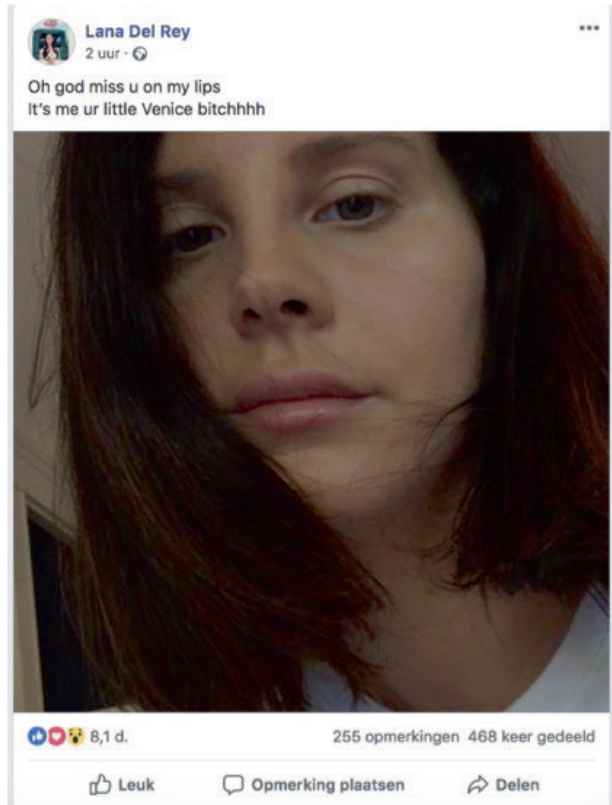


Fig. 7. Lana Del Rey. Selfie with lyrics. *Facebook*, 17 September 2018, 10:08 p.m.

<https://www.facebook.com/lanadelrey/photos/a.720244504684669/2262967527079018/?type=3&theater>

Around the release of her 2018 single *Venice Bitch*, pop star Lana Del Rey posted a selfie accompanied by lyrics on her Facebook page (Fig. 7). On her Instagram account she regularly uploads similar content. The phenomenon of selfies introduces yet another debate regarding performance and performative elements. Performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan approaches this form of self-generated digital portraiture (Senft & Baym 1589) as a *staged performance*, connecting self-portraiture and performance. Referring to visual artist Cindy Sherman, she emphasizes the discord between, on the one hand, the selfie as a very normative practice, motivated by a neoliberal discourse (Lepecki 175) and, on the other hand, the possibilities it offers for contesting the same norms by appropriating the script connected to it. Phelan underlines this connection by showing how Sherman inscribes herself with her photography in historical representations of women, opening up towards self-performance. Her embodiment of representation, as a very porous given, then becomes the central element (Phelan).

Besides being an avid selfie-poster, the ambiguous nature of the selfie is also typical of the artistic performance of Lana Del Rey. On the one hand, she approaches her audience in a way that suggests directness, for example with the amateur approach of the short video snippets she posts on social media, as well as in her music videos. On the other hand, the entire aesthetic she has been exploring during the last decade, reminds us of times long gone, introducing a kind of historical distance concerning the various scripts of what it means to be a woman and a superstar. Faded video colours, outfits in pastel pink and baby blue and the film noir detail of the femme fatale with blood red nail polish and lipstick quickly became her trademark and often-recurring themes in song lyrics.

The videoclip for her hit single *Videogames* shows several short snippets of Del Rey posing for her webcam, a predecessor to taking selfies with a smartphone. Meanwhile, she emulates the exact look of old school celebrities: Priscilla Presley, Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy in the clip for her single *National Anthem* (Fig. 8), or even Virgin Mary in her movie *Tropico* (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. Lana Del Rey as Jackie Kennedy in Lana Del Rey, *National Anthem* (2:30)

Textually, she also appropriates the figure of Lolita, writer Vladimir Nabokov's nymphet, as she opens the song *Off With The Races* with the famous words "Light of my life, fire of my loins". More recent looks and imagery show how she does not limit herself to this explicit vintage approach, or at least she is gradually making it less explicit whilst still holding onto her retro image. She does not aim to be very exact anymore when copying historically correct fashion looks. She just adopts the elements that fit her narrative. Her ambiguous approach once again emphasizes how the musical persona is primarily a multi-stable construction. The importance of online appearance was underlined even more clearly when the American artist deleted everything from her Instagram account in September 2017 (Britton). This caused a considerable amount of online turmoil, something that also characterized her entry into the world of show business. During her appearance on the popular show *Saturday Night Live* in 2012, numerous critics interpreted her mediocre and nervous appearance as evidence of inauthenticity, which was along the same lines as the rumours that she had undergone plastic surgery in order to create her signature plump lips.



Fig. 9. Lana Del Rey as Virgin Mary in Lana Del Rey,
Tropico (13:51)

Del Rey obviously plays with the homogeneity characterizing certain crystalized patterns regarding femininity. The main question is whether she is just trying to iconize herself using these new strategies of self-staging, or effectively questioning certain adopted scripts. Referring to Adorno's and Horkheimer's rather pessimistic view on popular culture, literary scholar Cathérine Vigier actually interprets the case of Del Rey as a counter- example. Contrary to most observations, she extracts a different reading from the nostalgia for a different gender relation typical of her overarching narrative. In the light of the complex character of a musical persona in the twenty-first century, I partly agree with this. According to Vigier, Del Rey actively engages with gender performativity through constantly re-embodying already existing images of women, whilst simultaneously questioning them (8). The more diffuse boundaries created by leaping from representation to presentation, graft onto an operative framework of values. Staging becomes executing, changing gender identity in everyday life, which brings about that "(...) aufführen zum Ausführen wird und damit rückwirkt auf das Konstituieren von Geschlechteridentitäten im Alltag" (Flath, 42).

Although this tends to be interpreted as Del Rey re-inscribing certain old-fashioned stereotypes, and subsequently not being of any critical value, I precisely think that it is necessary to highlight the embodiment of so-called problematic stereotypes that are being used as a tactic in order to tackle them from the inside. Aesthetic attraction opens up in her work a critical questioning of traditional images without necessarily destroying them, which is the power of creative appropriation. Both the anonymity and extreme exposure that social media platforms provide enable these features. The accessibility of a screen that we carry around at all times; a stage that we can access with only one swipe of the omnipresent mobile device, has major repercussions for artists' self-staging.

A space of appearance

In the previously-cited article on the contemporary music world, Waugh emphasizes the interplay between *staged performances* on social media and social media becoming a *performed stage*. Due to the disappearing distinction between online and offline, our understanding of spatiality in relation to performance has shifted. Children of the post-Internet era are less and less able to distinguish between online and offline identities. Waugh observes " (...) digital media's impact on the 'real world' that is critical to Post-Internet identity politics" whilst also recognizing that "real life' activities simultaneously inform the construction of these networks and the personas presented on them" (237). The mix of both is

shown when he explores the music project of duo Justin Swinburne and Samia Mirza. On stage, the duo introduce images referring to virtual worlds that resemble our daily environment, such as the virtual world of *Second Life*, whilst at the same time underlining the inherent intertwining between performing a persona in an actual space and a virtual one by performing live on stage (241).

Waugh's work is useful in making sense of Instagram as a site for performance in the virtual public space. Instagram stories are a feature that the social network platform has provided since 2016. It allows users to share images as ephemeral 'stories', meaning that these images disappear after 24 hours, in contrast to usual Instagram posts. American rapper Mykki Blanco uses the application frequently, also during his time at the Brussels' arts festival *Kunstenfestivaldesarts*. As he was invited to present some of his poetry during the evening programme *Beyond the Codes* in 2017, Blanco not only performed on the stage set-up in the Dynasty Building, he also did so on the social network. The queer idol that started her career as a performance artist –by posting YouTube videos - was dressed during this event in a cream wedding gown with a bustier. Even before spitting around rap verses during the actual scheduled concert, she had already started to dance outside the venue in public in this outfit and running around in the surrounding gardens while her fans were left inside the hall (Fig. 10). Her assistant captured this performance with a smartphone camera which almost none of the fans that were actually present witnessed directly. The heavy white material of her dress created a visually enchanting scene for Instagram followers watching the continuous online performance of Mykki Blanco. In his most recent publication, Auslander defends the idea of a "fusion of horizons" to make sense of live art and theatre performances and their documented pendants. Similarly, Mykki Blanco's persona performance needs to be read in terms of a "fusion of physical and digital selves" (Waugh, 242), including both self-staging online and on an actual stage.

Blanco performing her persona in a real public space, a park around Brussels' central station, and sharing it on the social networking application Instagram, raises the question whether these social media platforms can be a virtual equivalent or only an addition to our current comprehension of public space? Can social media actually fulfil this function? The display of a so-called authentic identity is central to this, which in our current cultural climate flies in the face of the contradictory force of staging multiple identities.

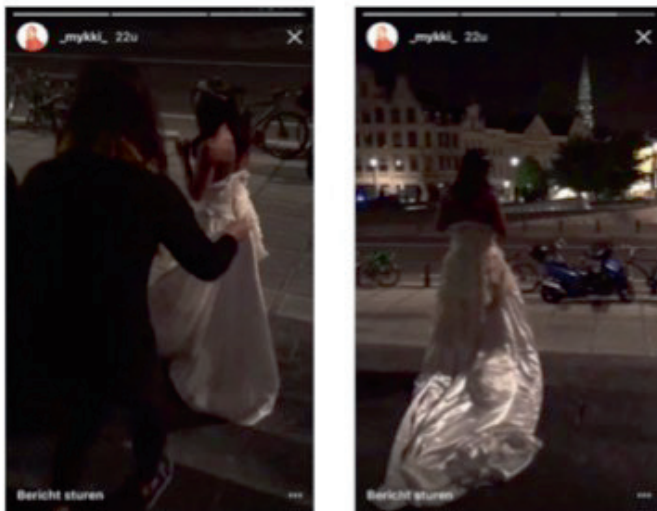


Fig. 10. @MykkiBlanco. “Running around in wedding gown” *Instagram stories*, 6 May 2017

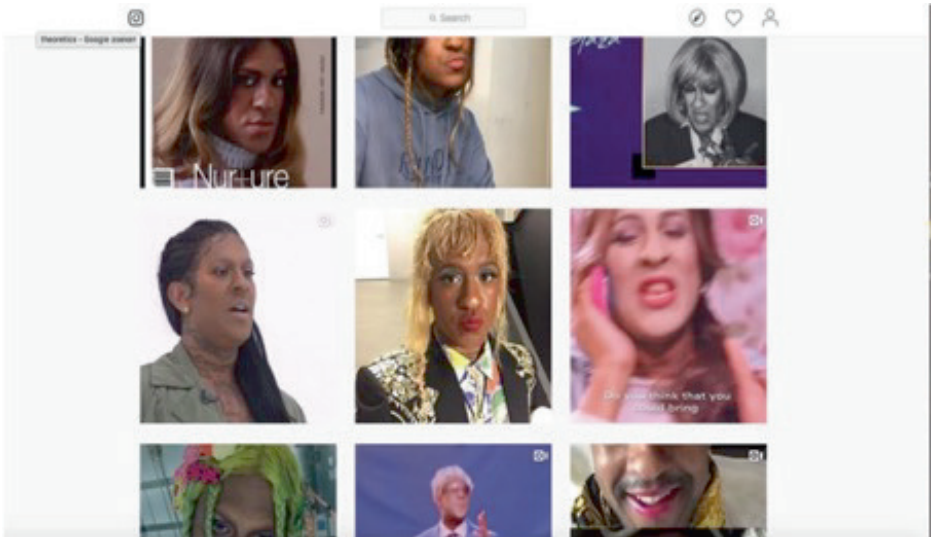


Fig. 11. @MykkiBlanco. *Instagram*,
www.instagram.com/mykkiblanco/

Theatre scholar Charlotte Gruber investigated a dynamic that relates to these questions in her research on virtual performances *InterActions. Performing Actual and Virtual Spaces as Stages of Inter-est*. In order to show how spaces can be performed, introducing a valuable performance practice negotiating alienation inherent to the human condition, she bases her theoretical framework on the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt. She looks mainly into interactive performances using network devices to occupy and regenerate the potential of public space, which renders them inherently political. The key questions at stake in her research are actually only a step away from considering musical persona performance and its possibility of resurrecting a virtual public space.

In her selection of alternative performances that she considers worth analyzing, Gruber draws on an analogy with the terminology Arendt uses in her research to conceptualize human essence. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses public space as a locus parallel to that of a performed stage. To resurrect a *performed space*, whether virtual or actual, a *space of appearance* is needed. Arendt's argument that these spaces need to be actualized all the time, bleeds into what Judith Butler later called 'iterability', a constant repetition of this negotiation. The disclosure of identity should intertwine interaction and performance. Although Arendt's theory in a historical perspective seems to deal with a more radical understanding of both authentic and true identity, I propose a reading of Arendt's identity and self-disclosure, connected to her definition of politics per se, adapted more closely to our present context of fragmented performance. It is essentially a construct, an endless assemblage of elements that we group together into what we consider to be an identity that we can stage.

In order to make sense of this more ambivalent understanding of performing an identity, without dismissing authenticity, the persona as an equally transitory zone can help to make sense of it. Its inherently dual character takes into account both the roots of personality and the theatrical history that the persona adds as a tradition on the one hand, with the superfluous stage of social media inherently connected these days to being a music artist, on the other.

Due to an extreme use of spectacular elements entangled with underlying political intentions, Mykki Blanco is an interesting case-study (Fig. 11). Blanco doesn't shy away from engaging in political discussions on his Facebook artist page, just as he doesn't separate the colourful imaginings (both literal and figurative) of being a queer, HIV-positive, black artist. Because of the impact

these celebrity figures can have, interaction lies at the core of their musical persona. What looks like an explosion of elements of spectacle assembling into one stage identity, does not distort his or her personal political agency, and vice versa.

Taking a step back once more and returning to the question of online and virtual public space, it should be recognized that not every public space necessarily has the ability to become a *space of appearance* in the sense that Arendt initially intended it to have. More common are forms of pseudo-agency, as Gruber calls it (30). This is also the case for the majority of musical personae we can detect, both online and offline. Their intention is not only to challenge ideas dominating our daily environment and social relationships; it is based on the disclosure of their true private selves, beliefs and deep desires. Despite this, I would argue that some of them succeed intervening in current discourses in ways that can be considered political. However, they do so by employing a creative, playful, artificial and, ultimately, thoroughly performed persona. The accent needs to be on the *performative utterance* and its constant actualisation as a main condition that needs to be fulfilled. Gruber gives the general example of a YouTube channel in her research to illustrate a related statement. A music performer, as well as any other user, is free to present anything he wants on there. Nevertheless, this doesn't guarantee it to be a *space of appearance*, as much of the content is more or less usurped by a neoliberal and capitalist logic.

The way Phelan looks at the selfie as both a threat and an opportunity comes down to the same thing. A space characterized by a certain degree of performativity, does not automatically constitute a valuable performance, does not spontaneously call into question accumulated assumptions about identity and self-staging, and hence does not correspond to Arendt's use of the term *inter-est*. Gruber's interpretation of the state of *inter-esse* in some interactive theatre performances, generates a framework just as interesting in order to interpret certain musical persona performances as a negotiation of a place where a person can fully express an identity, without being subjected to norms or traditional scripts – although the latter should probably be re-evaluated in a day and age when it has become impossible to escape these.

Places of transgression and the heterotopia

In the final section of this paper, I want to tie together both the dual character of performing the persona as a practice rooted in the foundations of performance

studies and the previously discussed understanding of public space as a stage for the persona. I would like to posit that contemporary online persona performance in some cases could be understood in terms of creating a heterotopia with more or less powerful political implications.

Foucault defined the idea of heterotopia during a lecture he gave in 1967 precisely as a space in-between the mythical and real: “ces espaces différents, ces autres lieux, une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l’espace où nous vivons.” He calls these spaces mythical, because they rely partly on a thought construction, but at the same time stay very close to the physical experience of the spaces we encounter in daily life. Some spaces connected to persona performance also open up a demarcated location where traditional norms are reversed. Brüstle calls this: “Gegen-Raume, in denen die moralische Normen der traditionellen Räume ausser Kraft gesetzt werden” (105). Although these spaces regulate reality differently, they ought to be distinguished from utopias, as the utopia is pronouncedly more undefined and intangible.

An interpretation of the contemporary musical persona in relation to heterotopia includes contested ‘realness’, appropriating attributes of the real (Halberstam 51), yet setting up an alternative universe. Although this was already possible on a physical stage in a sense, its expansion with a virtual equivalent enhances the heterotopic qualities even further. Both the oscillation between theatricality and performativity and the selfie as an ambiguous practice point towards a liminal space, a space where transition towards a different reality might begin to be imagined. The musical persona in a contemporary Internet culture possesses the possibility of resurrecting a stage where marginalized identities can be seen. The overlap between the online and physical stage only enhances heterotopic qualities, which relates to Arendt’s notion of *inter-esse* in terms of centralizing interaction and identity.

The musical persona spreads its wings and does not solely (re)present an identity, but also centralizes this identity within our complex day-to-day universe. Reinforcing this point of view is the way in which Auslander has actually already labelled the musical persona as a laboratory, a place for experimentation: “A performance practice through which alternative realities could be enacted and tested” (*Performing Glam Rock* 228). Exactly this aspect of the concept that Auslander pinpoints opens up a whole new perspective for research on musical personae.

The recurrence of spaces deviating from common understandings of social relations and/or identity is striking in theatre scholar Vito Pinto's analysis of Del Rey's music video *Ride* from 2012 (Fig. 12). He brings to the fore the way in which the depicted locations in the video emphasize her earlier role of 'the other woman' as discussed previously. Places such as the motel, the highway, the hotel room, the night club or the desert function as "Orte(n) des Übergangs", places of transition. Essentially, these more common places of public space dealing with deviant identities concentrate just as much on the transgressive character of a liminal space where a certain display of identity is being critically questioned (127).

It makes sense to approach Del Rey as an artist who cites these transgressive spaces in her own performed intermediate universe that she presents mostly online, as an element within her entire creation of a musical persona. The heterotopical quality of the spaces is key to her colourful narrative as a music artist. It is always a game whereby she uses physical, imaginary and (by extension) digital spaces through which she negotiates her identity around the topoi of what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century. Her contested views on feminism also play a role within this, although there is no room in this paper to expand on this.

Music sociologist Rosa Reitsamer gives yet another interpretation of the heterotopic space as a crucial part of the musical persona in her essay *Popfrauen der Gegenwart*, as she uses the word "pornotopia" for what American artist Peaches does as a musician (105). The word, derived from Foucault's heterotopia, indicates female sexuality as its main target. In order to create her controversial musical universe, Peaches appropriates and adapts the conventional male-driven framework of pornography to her own preferences. Nonetheless, Peaches' work does not become any less sex-centered because of this, or indeed less spectacular, quite the opposite. Approaching the spectacle of music performance from this perspective touches upon the afterlife of situationist Guy Debord's works. Peaches' universe accesses this criticality not just by rejecting what she's reacting against, but by staying within (Best 129). As such, she fulfils Debord's demand to critique the spectacle on the one hand, whilst realizing that there is no way to go beyond it, to really criticize it from within an ivory tower, on the other. Colour and play will always be a necessary element and acknowledging the spaces where these can transform into critical thought, is the first step towards further exploration of the phenomenon.



Fig. 12. The motel in Lana Del Rey, *Ride* (1:05)

Apotheosis

Social media as a performance platform and the performances of musical personae therein remains relatively unexplored terrain. They touch, however, on core issues of performance studies by oscillating between triggering social change and spectacle. The examples discussed here reveal themselves to rely, to a large extent, on a digital space that has much in common with the actual public space. Gruber's reading of performances in the public space, which she connects to Arendt's *space of appearance*, makes it possible to gain a more thorough insight into the self-staging of musicians, just as the Foucauldian understanding of a heterotopia does.

The apparent merging of online performance and live performance supports and likewise questions the conventional comprehension of live music performance and the radically different character of its documented forms, which Auslander already pointed out. Mykki Blanco, Connan Mockasin and Lana del Rey each highlight in their own way how embodiment, performative language utterance and image processing are essential parts of their self-staging, a chiasmic and performative dynamic between the *staged performance* of a musical persona and the *performed stage* it has been occupying in recent times. Online appearances of musical personae can be considered as a dense assemblage of various performative pieces of the puzzle; something that will hopefully be taken into consideration and examined more closely in the future.

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¹ Mockasin, Connan. "Connan Mockasin as Mr Bostyn – Live at Rough Trade." YouTube. 16 July 2019. <https://youtu.be/9NlloV4V6BA>.

² A selfie is a form of self-portraiture typically created using smartphones or webcams and shared on social media networks (Hess 1629). The word was added to the Oxford Dictionary in 2013.