American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

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Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART II

Page, Stage and Gaze Reconfigured

METAMODERN AESTHETICS OF SELFIENESS AND SURVEILLANCE IN *YOUARENOWHERE* AND *I'LL NEVER LOVE AGAIN*

Emma Willis
University of Auckland

This article considers the impact of selfie culture on constructions of dramatic subjectivity by discussing two works: Andrew Schneider's "solo" performance, *YOUARENOWHERE*,[1] a high-tech exploration of the fragility of human subjectivity that surprises the audience halfway through with a doppelganger from a parallel universe, and Clare Barron's *I'll Never Love Again*,[2] which takes an eleven-person choir of different ages, genders and ethnicities to narrate excerpts from her teenage diaries. I suggest that the dramaturgy of these "solo" semi-autobiographical performances reflects the impact of both social media paradigms and the surveillances that attend them. In one sense, the treatment of dramatic subjectivity by the artists reflects the postmodern fragmentation of stable selfhood and postdramatic breakdown of dramatic unity—what Elinor Fuchs calls the "death of character" when she writes of the impact of poststructural thinking on theatre practices, observing that the "disappearance"[3] of stable character reflects "the unoccupied occupant of the subject position."[4] Extending this paradigm, both Schneider and Barron's works reflect the post-postmodern position of subjectivity in the 21st century; their dramaturgies suggest the sense in which contemporary selves, via social media and other technologies, are available for endless re-presentation and re-configuration. Indeed, Andy Horwitz has described Schneider's work as being about "the dissolution of the self in the digital age."[5] The attitude towards disaggregated selfhood in these works is deeply ambivalent, however; marked by a sense of profound loneliness and disconnection and a nostalgic yearning for a self more unified and contained, or at the very least more materially reliable. I wish to frame this ambivalence as "metamodern" in character.

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1 Excerpts of the play are available on the platform *Vimeo*.

2 A trailer is available on the platform *Vimeo*.

3 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1996, p. 7.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

5 Andy Horwitz, "*YOUARENOWHERE*: New Frontiers of Performance," *Theatre Forum*, no. 47, 2015, p. 55.

Jesse Weaver Shipley's description of "selfieness" provides a helpful starting point for this discussion. He writes:

> … the selfie, rather than a singular form of technologically driven self-portraiture, is a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition. Selfieness is an emotional and semiotic field that emerges through the potential ever-presence of the selfie. [6]

Shipley extends our understanding of the selfie from discrete material object to immanent affectivity. Moreover, he explains that the selfie's storytelling capacity extends across multiple mediums. Whilst Shipley's definition is stretched by its application to the dramatic context, I nonetheless suggest that the concept of selfieness helps to tease out the formulation of selfhood in both Schneider and Barron's dramaturgies. Both works in part mimic or suggest certain aspects of selfie culture. Schneider's scenography, for example, uses a frame large enough to enclose the actor's head and shoulders—like a close-up shot—as a central scenic device and motif. Particularly in the first part of the performance, the character, only known as "A," constantly moves in and out of this frame. Less obviously, Barron's play mimics what Bernie Hogan describes as the "exhibition structure" of online curations of the self, and her presentation to the audience of a series of personal artifacts for display— namely excerpts and drawings from her journals—can be described as an elaborate act of over-sharing. [7] The templates for identity construction that social media provides are both alluded to and critiqued in each work by way of their dramaturgical construction.

For selfies are not simply an act of transmission, a digital iteration of selfhood shaped and controlled by the producer of the image. Rather, selfies exists within complex networked digital and social structures governed by both external and internal surveillance mechanisms. Thus, any dramaturgical analysis that takes selfieness as an analytical lens needs also to consider how surveillance impacts upon the construction and projection of selfhood. In his analysis of what he calls "artveillance," Andrea Mubi Brighenti writes that:

> Surveillance does not simply produce substantive social control and social triage, it also contributes to the formation of an ideoscape and a collective imagery about what

6   Jesse Weaver Shipley, "Selfie Love: Public Lives in an Era of Celebrity Pleasure, Violence, and Social Media," *American anthropologist*, vol. 117, no. 2, 2015, p. 404.

7   Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 30, no. 6, 2010, p. 377.

security, insecurity, and control are ultimately about, as well as the landscape of moods and affects a surveillance society like ours expresses.[8]

Brighenti's point is that surveillance mechanisms have a profound social impact beyond their remit of controlling behavior, shaping both individual subjectivities and collective identities. Seen from the perspective of the intersection of selfieness and surveillance, the dramaturgical structures of Schneider and Barron's works reflect the distinctly ambivalent "moods and affects" of early twenty-first century digital cultures wherein what Shipley calls selfieness' "potential ever presence" produces equal amounts of exhilaration and exhaustion, confidence and anxiety.

As suggested above, I wish to consider this ambivalence as metamodern in character. In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker proposed the term "metamodernism" to describe the structure of feeling they suggest marks the post-postmodern era. Metamodernism, they write, "is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment."[9] This oscillation plays out between a series of dualities: enthusiasm and irony, hope and melancholy, naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.[10] While the interrelation of selfieness and surveillance helps to account for the social context in which Schneider and Barron's works have been created, and the subsequent impact of this upon their dramaturgies, the notion of the metamodern enables a closer scrutiny of the feeling or affectivity of each work, in particular the sense of yearning described earlier. Moreover, if postmodernity displaced the stable self, then selfie culture has staged a return of sorts. Metamodernism therefore provides a useful paradigmatic framework through which to consider the seemingly contradictory impulses and affects in each of the pieces. In what follows, I provide an analysis of each piece with reference to selfieness and surveillance before finally returning to the concept of the metamodern by way of conclusion.

YOUARENOWHERE

YOUARENOWHERE presents us with an image of selfhood on the verge of catastrophic collapse. In my analysis of the work I wish to focus on three areas:

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8   Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Artveillance: At the Crossroads of Art and Surveillance," *Surveillance and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, p. 175.

9   Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, p. 2.

10   *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

I firstly consider the manner in which the protagonist's experience of selfhood is technologically mediated and propose that a fruitful comparison may be drawn between multimediality of selfieness and the ontological "multiverse" with which the character grapples. Secondly, I take up the theme of isolation, which I suggest is a result of the "potential ever-presence" of mediated selfhood. Lastly, I discuss the self-reflexivity of the performance whereby the act of *staging* becomes an image for the experience of *being*. I suggest that the metatheatrical components of the work demonstrate how theatre is particularly well positioned to take account of the affectivities of selfieness. Before proceeding, the complex non-narrative structure of *YOUARENOWHERE* necessitates a brief description of the work.

The performance is divided into two distinct halves. The first presents as a solo featuring an unnamed protagonist known in the script as "A"—maybe a version of (Andrew) Schneider himself, maybe not—who speaks directly to the audience, delivering a rapid-fire monologue that combines scientific explanation and personal disclosure. The text mainly revolves around the proposals of quantum physics, the possibility of multiple universes and what this might mean for personal identity. The anecdotal material reveals A's prevailing anxieties, developing a picture of the character as someone unable to sensibly integrate himself into the world as it is.

The textual components of the performance move between varying registers, a linguistic choreography not unlike using a computer and flicking between multiple open tabs. Indeed, Schneider describes how this kind of kinetic and technologically-informed process was used to create the work:

> The show has been created mostly in a digital fashion. I've spent varied and sporadic work periods in my apartment and the rehearsal room surrounded by books, computers, lights, and microphones. Instead of writing down dialogue, I record the dialogue ideas in short bits, fits and starts. Instead of transcribing an idea from a book or a YouTube video, I record my voice reading or mimicking the source. Instead of editing and copying and pasting words and sentences in a word processor, I edit and copy and paste waveforms in an audio editing software. These are my tools for creating text. [11]

This multiple tab-like structure is reflected both in the movement between different registers of speech and even within blocks of text. For example, when A begins to speak, the language is almost nonsensical:

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11   Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE, Theatre*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2016, p. 87.

> Hi thank you for coming! I have things to say. I think. I think I remembered my notes. Not so quite sure why I'm not wearing a shirt, but let's get to things, shall we? The life is an object that has many similar qualities to lying in a cold patch of grass on a hot autumn day. The leaves are rising. You've got a thermos of hot lemonade. You haven't showered in days and you've forgotten what your sense of smell tastes like. The birds are shouting, "we love to sing!" and you can see your house from here as the paramedics begin to pick the gravel out of your face… ok I'm not so quite sure that I have the right notes sorry. [12]

The language is scored through with a sense of panic—short sentences leaping from one idea to the next—while the character seems uncertain and disoriented: he can't remember his notes, he doesn't know where his shirt is. The imagery is unsettling—leaves rise rather than fall, the lemonade is hot instead of cold. Moreover, there is an uneasy slippage between "I" and "you." The effect is to convey a lack of command or mastery from the performer, a vulnerability that is reinforced throughout the performance as various technological interruptions "undermine" the actor.

The extensive citation from scientific texts provides a contrasting "tab" that is more authoritative in character. For example, A quotes the author of *From Eternity to Here*, scientist Sean Carroll:

> We're now suggesting that we can think of the whole shebang, the entire history of the world, as a single four-dimensional thing, where the additional dimension is time. In this sense, time serves to slice up the four-dimensional universe into copies of space at each moment in time—the whole universe at 10:00 A.M. on January 20, 2010; the whole universe at 10:01 A.M. on January 20, 2010; and so on. There are an infinite number of such slices, together making up the universe. [13]

This movement between registers is significant, as the performance flips and turns between evidence-driven scientific hypothesis, and the messy, irreconcilable affectivity of trying to hold it together in a world that is, as A describes below, fundamentally splintered:

> Do you guys ever think that anytime you happen to think about or get scared of or have a really close call with dying, that just right there in that moment you actually already

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12   *Ibid.*, p. 91.

13   Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time*, Oxford, Oneworld Books, 2010, p. 5. This quotation is not printed in full in the published script for copyright reasons, however it is possible to deduce it from the excerpts provided. I have provided the details for Carroll's book itself the bibliography.

have died? And now are already dead. And that time just—there—just now—split off into a new universe—and that, this has probably happened dozens and dozens and perhaps even hundreds of times in your life considering just how much time you spend thinking about death and time not to mention the many near misses we all have. And that there's all these alternate yous and alternate times spinning off and splintering and moving forward concurrently. [14]

The dramaturgy of the performance itself captures this spinning, splintering quality, seemingly haphazardly moving its audience between different modes of engagement, including the deeply personal. For example, A shares the story of being at a friend's house as a boy when his friend's father died. The kind of emotional empathy or identification that is elicited in these moments is significant, as it heightens the sense of panic and loss in other scenes. Taken together these different modes, helpfully conceived as alternating tabs, build an environment of deep uncertainty driven by relentless questioning.

The relentlessness of the first half culminates in the reveal that comes halfway through the performance, when the back wall of the set drops down to reveal another audience and another actor who is costumed exactly like A and in all regards his doppelganger (played by Peter Mustante); after hypothesizing alternate selves, Schneider is now confronted with another Schneider. A frantically tries to prove his uniqueness, desperately trying to unmask character B as a pretender. What follows is long self-examination that is deeply personal and an accounting of what makes Schneider unique (or not). At this juncture, it is worth pausing to make note of how Schneider's use of a doppelganger reflects what Matthew Causey describes as the significance of the figure of the "double" in contemporary mediatized performance. According to Causey, the "presence of the *double* takes places through mediated duplication" in "the simple moment when a live actor confronts her mediated other through the technologies of reproduction." [15] Schneider recognizes and responds to this technoculture context (and in this sense it is worth acknowledging his history of working with the Wooster Group), [16] but at the same time complicates it through presenting not simply a *mediated* double, but a real, fleshy double. Schneider's use

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14   Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
15   Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 17.
16   Schneider, formerly a member of the Wooster Group, is well known for his interest and innovation in this area.

of technology to "extend" subjectivity [17] is therefore highly ambivalent, ultimately showing the material body—and the sense of selfhood that attaches to this body—as stubbornly resistant.

Indeed, in the last section of the work, B takes control. He asks the audience to change places with the B audience, and for A to change sides with him (the B audience is an actual audience, composed of people who have already seen the show, and have been invited back to perform the role of "audience." I received an email invitation after seeing the show the first time, and subsequently returned to see it a second time from the B perspective). Once the changeover is completed, the lights go down on our side of the stage and up on the other in a reversal of the original set up. B begins performing in the early section of the show, repeating what was performed to us almost an hour earlier. Schneider stands and watches: stunned, appalled, horrified, amazed? Then, there is a violent rumbling and the stage becomes dark. When the lights return, B and the B audience are gone. A series of sound cables hang from the ceiling. Schneider slowly speaks backwards, the speech is then replayed forwards. A single light bulb drops to the floor and shatters and the lights go out.

> *(nothing)*
> *(rumble. key of A)*
> *(a singularity)*
> *(a single point of light. Eyes adjust. A single white led)*
> *(another point of light some distance away. Then another)*
> *(slowly the space transforms into a star field as hundreds of tiny single white leds illuminate)*
> *(we are out here among the stars)*
> *(end)* [18]

As I hope my brief description of the performance has made evident, Schneider's dramaturgy challenges a number of normative dramatic principles related to both character and structure. His interest is in an affective dramaturgy that works on its audience at a visceral as well as an intellectual level. The combination of light, sound, image and action are designed to "mak[e] you feel with your body what the show attempts to make you understand with your mind." [19] This "feeling with the body" is important in that it bypasses a more conventional dramatic identificatory model, whilst at the same time drawing the audience into a parallel experience of disorientation.

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[17] Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[18] Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

That is, the affective dramaturgy shapes an experience for the audience akin to the very multiplied and simultaneous complex realities that are described by the scientific tracts. Repetition, circularity, multiplication, simultaneity and reversal characterize the work's construction. Or, as Emeline Jouve remarks:

> With the support of technology, Schneider offers the spectators a quantic multi-representation of time and space—which appear as times and spaces—instead of a traditional linear representation. This break from tradition gives the false impression of a defective representation of reality when in fact this approach brings us closer to the essence of reality.[20]

Jouve's remarks point to the complexity of the performance in its suturing together of the material and the virtual. As she writes, the effect is to dramatize the instability of reality itself. Moreover, the emphasis on viscerality suggests the knowingness or intelligence of the body itself—an intelligence that is sometimes at war with intellectual perception. Indeed, Schneider is engaged in an intense physical as well as conceptual struggle throughout the work.

While the dramaturgy is characterized by what Jouve calls the "reality D-fect,"[21] there is at the same time a steady progressive character arc of sorts, which follows A through an escalating ontological crisis that ends with the suggested end of A himself. In this way, the performance incorporates linearity within its multi-directional framework, testing the limits at which stable self-image begins to pull apart. In this sense, the relationship between technology and the self is shown to be deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, the performance celebrates technological possibility through Schneider-the-actor's use of wearable technology which integrates performance and technical operation and in so doing foregrounds him as a very active composer of his own self-images in the sense meant by Shipley. On the other, A is often shown to be captive to forces outside of his control, which continually interrupt his performance. For example, in the opening minutes of the performance A struggles to get a word out while lights flash on and off, and what are described variously in the script as "unrendered beeps," "clicks" and "word salad" dominate the sound scape.[22] There is a sense, particularly in the first half of the performance, of A being plugged in to forces that shape and direct his behavior. Reviewer Jennifer Krasinski, for example, describes A as a "fractured self

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20   Emeline Jouve, "Doubleness on the New York Contemporary: Experimental Stage: Bodies and Technology," *Transatlantica*, 1| 2017, p. 8.

21   *Ibid.*, p. 2.

22   Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[…] that's jacked into invisible networks."[23] This description certainly articulates the fear that Causey describes when he writes of the common assertion in media studies that "there exists an unavoidable convergence of the human and machine wherein the *slave* machine dominates the *master* human subject."[24] Significantly, the "master" in the dramaturgy of *YOUARENOWHERE* is both embodied material *and* reproduction. That is, it is not a simple case of the human slave versus the machine master, rather it is the proliferation of the human—and the indistinguishability of different iterations of the self—that is both the dramatic problem and the most compelling aspect of the performance.

In the same way that such indistinction immediately complicates the master / slave dialectic, the directionality of the surveillance culture that the seemingly all-knowing double embodies is uncertain. Schneider's work cleverly dramatizes the struggle between images that a subject produces of themselves—the selfie—and the reproduction of images of the subject as a means of "social control that disempowers the subject" where "being visible means being under control by the agency that looks at us—even when that agency presents itself as 'looking after' us."[25] The performance's dominant scenographic image of the frame demonstrates this tension. The frame captures and contains the self in ways that provide coherence—for both the character and the audience—but that also entraps A. That is, the frame is not only a device for self-presentation, it is also a means of surveillance and capture wherein selfieness is shown as always already captive and compromised.

The hypothesis of the multiverse offers one way of thinking through the implication of the endless reproduction of images of the self in multiple parallel contexts and I suggest that there is a concord between the imagery of the "multiverse" in the play—most marked when the wall drops to reveal a parallel universe—and the nature of selfieness as a multimedia form. That is, the ever-branching self in the performance is structurally analogous to the proliferation of the self across digital networks. Indeed, the crisis that occurs when A is faced with B is very much a crisis of reproduction and identicality. The effect of this reproductive identicality is a kind of abjection; the non-differentiated instantiation of the self across multiple dimensions—the multiverse—is fundamentally alienating and isolating. Loneliness is therefore one of the most pronounced affects of the performance and is suggested from the outset when, amidst

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23   Jennifer Krasinski, "Mortal Coil," *Art Forum*, January 31, 2015.

24   Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

25   Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Artveillance," art. cit., p. 176.

the early series of false starts, the song *Lonesome Town* plays at half speed while A lip-syncs along.

> …Goin' down to Lonesometown
> where the broken hearts s<frame drop>tay.
> Goin' down to Lonesometown
> to cry my troubles away.
> In the town of broken dreams
> the streets are filled with regret.
> Maybe down in Lonesometown
> I can learn to forget…[26]

Elsewhere A remarks:

> It makes me sad that I won't be close to more people in my life. It makes me sad that I can't be inside of other people and experience things like they do. It makes me sad that I am alone. It makes me sad that I am turning into a person who prefers to be alone.[27]

Aloneness is an effect of self-division. Seen from the perspective of quantum physics, the more one is sliced into multiple versions, the less one is able to manifest the presence of being that makes intimate connection possible. Hence, the desire to understand and be understood by others is over and over proved impossible.

Schneider frames the problem of the self-divided subject in a theatrical context. Indeed, the virtuality of theatre—its boundless pliability, its characteristic *emptiness*—makes it an image or analogue of the universe itself. Near the end of the work, A remarks:

> I've been here before, I've been at a show where I've realized that this was all set up for me and that even everyone in the audience was in on it, and I was the only one who didn't know, but it was a way it was the easiest way to let me know or to let my brain know or something that…it had died…and the easiest way to let me know about that was while I was watching something and my brain was outside of itself and, well, it was a little different because I was in the audience, and not the one who was on stage, which, come to think of it I don't totally remember how I got here, but this is kind of how I thought it would happen. Kind of like this. Where nothing really changed, but it happened…[28]

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26 Andrew Schneider, *YOUARENOWHERE*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

A describes a kind of *déjà vu*—I've been in this audience before, I've been on this stage before. This disorientation arises from a collision of the states of looking and being-looked-at when the object that is being looked at is oneself. That is, through the use of the double—B—the performance explores what Causey calls the "uncanniness" of staring too long at one's own image,[29] a process whereby the self seems to become other. As suggested earlier, the metatheatrical components of *YOUARENOWHERE* demonstrate how theatre is well placed to take account of the affectivities or ontologies of selfieness, particularly in this case self-division and self-alienation. The explicit metatheatricality of Schneider's performance effectively depicts the inherent performativity of how contemporary subjectivity is distributed through the intertwined structures of selfieness and surveillance. Moreover, it points to the complex and contradictory aspects of self-staging, particularly when one retains very little agency within this process. While there is a profound exhilaration that comes from speeding through a network of multiple potentialities in Schneider's work, at the same time alienation and anxiety are produced by the relentlessness of this multi-directional movement. *You are now here, you are nowhere.*

I'LL NEVER LOVE AGAIN

Inspired by the writer's own teenage journals, Clare Barron's deeply personal play about first love, equal parts intoxication and devastation, cleverly defamiliarizes the autobiographical material. The play unfolds a range of dramaturgical transformations that take us from a diverse eleven-person choir of "Clares" in the first half—opening with the line "I no longer think it's disgusting to think about kissing," delivered at Bushwick Starr in New York by a middle-aged Asian woman (Mia Katigbak)—to dramatic realism in the second. My analysis of the play focuses on two areas. Firstly, returning to Shipley's definition of selfieness as "a multimedia genre of autobiography or memoir that makes the image maker into the protagonist of stories of his or her own composition," I wish to frame Barron's play as a dramaturgy of selfieness that stages the self through the production of multiple interconnected iterations of Barron's own experiences. Unlike the smoothness that Hogan attributes to normative presentations of the online self, Barron works with an aesthetic of rough disjunction and in this sense complicates our perceptions of selfieness. Secondly, and following, the play not only reflects or mimics selfieness, it also wryly critiques it. This is largely done through its emphasis on self-surveillance, and indeed the play itself may be understood as an act of

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29   Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

intense self-scrutiny. The exploration of self-surveillance takes on an especially feminist character in its focus on body-image and self-image, and on sexual and affective power relations between women and men. As such, I position the play's dramaturgy as located within the paradigm of fourth-wave feminism in as much, as Ruxandra Looft suggests, "a distinctive trait of the fourth wave movement is it reliance and usage of technology and social media to connect and reach populations across cultural and national borders."[30] Ultimately, I will argue, the play deploys a strategy of evasion and disguise to mitigate and complicate its personal "over-sharing." As with Schneider, I begin my discussion with a brief description of the work.

The object of the narrator's affection is Josh. The choir, in alternating first person address that includes sung and spoken material, relate Barron's story of falling in love with and becoming Josh's girlfriend, then the complete emotional devastation when

he ends the relationship. The writing is filled with the emotional energy of teenage girlhood—from infatuation to deep despair—and in this sense is very funny. The music (by composer and music director Stephanie Johnstone) reflects this energy, and is perhaps best described as emotionally astute indie pop, skewering the baroque aspect of an author scoring her own teenage trauma, whilst at the same time using the simple arrangements of voice to striking effect—my own heart soared and plummeted along with the singers. With the musical accompaniment underpinning the storytelling, we see Clare go from the highs of her first kisses with Josh—"when he touched me like that on my side it was like roots sprung up out of the ground and grew up both my legs and through my whole body and then a tree came out of my head and exploded into a lightning bolt"[31]—to preliminary disappointments when there is no follow through: "Romance is dead. Romance is dead for me FOREVER."[32] Barron's play does more than simply divide her teenage chronicles into a choric score, however. Just when the audience is comfortably settled into the conceit of the choir, the dramaturgy shifts and the choral presentation segues into an uncomfortably raw and hyper-realistic dramatic scene that shows Clare in a disturbing early sexual encounter. At Bushwick Starr, Barron herself played the role of Clare. This dramaturgical shift from the wry ironic choir carrying the full weight of the storytelling to the author literally exposing herself on stage was a sharp jolt, as if a traumatic memory had insisted itself upon the play.

30   Ruxandra Looft, "#girlgaze: Photography, Fourth Wave Feminism, and Social Media Advocacy," *Continuum*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2017, p. 894.

31   Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, 2016, unpublished playscript, p. 4.

32   *Ibid.*, p. 10.

After Barron's scene, which comes at the end of Act II, the dramaturgy shifts once more. The final setting is an office break room in a law firm, with Clare, now a young lawyer, played at Bushwick Starr by a Black actress, Nana Mensah. The last act plays out, for the most part, in a fairly conventional realist mode, as various office workers come in and out of the break room. A twelve-year-old female character, Oona is introduced (played by child actor Oona Montandon). She appears to be a version of who Clare might have been had she taken the advice that she now offers to the younger woman. And there is yet another Clare, played by a choir member near the end of the third act, who describes a broken Clare:

> …I stopped washing my body
> I stopped brushing my hair
> I could smell my pussy everywhere I went
> Layer upon layer of secretions and sweat
> I masked it all with perfume
> And big box-sack dresses that I stopped washing
> I slept on the floor in a nest with my cats
> I only loved people who gave me food
> And the love only lasted as long as the eating…[33]

In contrast with the staccato frantic anxiety of Schneider's text, there is a much deeper sense of melancholy at play here, as well as focus on the materiality of the body, as the disintegrating self is given a deeply visceral quality in Barron's poetic text. Moreover, where Schneider's world explodes outwards, Barron's collapses inward.

The play finally draws together a collision of possible Clares: not only do we have the eleven versions of Clare from choric sections, and then the real Clare herself, but also the young speculative and fictional Clare in the form of Oona, the hypothesis of a professional Clare, the lament for a Clare completely consumed by failure and grief. The final language of the play goes to young Oona who, at a concert anticipating the Mayan apocalypse (a recurring image in the play), exuberantly declares her beliefs:

> The ONLY THING I KNOW
> Is that I love soccer!
> And softball!
> And swimming!
> And volleyball!

33 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

And color!
And passion!
And risks!
And devouring life!
And dreaming and really believing with every
ounce it could come true!
And crying!
And wild fantasies!
And the strength of the human spirit!
And something so great we can't understand it!
And love!
And sacrifice!

And sports!
And sports!
And sports!!!!![34]

This sense of exaltation in Oona's speech lifts the play from the melancholic (albeit darkly funny) affect previously described, providing a sense of hope for the future.

Significantly, as suggested at the outset, there is a metamodern both/and quality to *I'll Never Love Again*; it is at the same time ironic and sincere, deeply knowing and deeply vulnerable. I suggest that this oscillatory quality allows Barron to provide a feminist critique of selfieness through a nuanced dramaturgical approach that acknowledges both the gains and trade-offs of female visibility in contemporary culture. In more theatrically-specific terms, the play's oscillation may be described as between Brechtian alienation, which effects a critique of "selfieness," and realism which takes us inside how this cultural paradigm *feels* as lived-in-the-body, and it is in this oscillation that I am principally interested. It *is* possible to characterize the play's movement between different dramatic modes as a strategy of alienation in itself, that is, a way of concurrently historicizing the dramaturgy, the writer *and* her self-subject. However, I suggest that Barron's concurrent employment of different dramatic modes reveals the need to revisit or at least more contemporarily nuance the deployment of Brechtian paradigms in discourses of feminist theatre practice.[35] In her landmark 1988

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[34] Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 60-61. In the original unpublished script, the font size increases exponentially in this excerpt from 12 point to 47 point.

[35] Examples of feminist engagement with Brecht include: Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring 1988, p. 82-94; Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Handbook*, London, Routledge,

essay, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism", Elin Diamond proposed a "re-radicalization" of Brecht's theories that challenge what she describes as a "typical Marxian blindness toward gender relations."[36] Whilst there is not scope in this essay to "re-re-radicalize" this significant feminist scholarship in a way that brings it fully into the 21st-century context, it is worth remarking on the relationship between some of the distinctive features of fourth-wave feminism and their contextual (historical) situation, and the dramaturgy that Barron employs. My principal point of interest is, as noted, in the ways in which Barron (in a metamodern sense) pivots between "offering the illusion of lived experience"[37] in such a way that we are encouraged to substitutively *feel* that experience in all its uncomfortability, and its deconstructive opposite.

In the same way that fourth-wave feminism is strongly associated with its digital and transnational dimensions, the most distinctive dramaturgical feature of the play is indeed its transitivity, which is both structural and embodied: not only does Clare's story move between bodies, but Barron herself (in 2016 at least) also involved her own body on stage. In a press interview, Barron explained the choice to use the choir to narrate the first section of the play as being about "letting the language [of the play] live in the bodies of many different actors so it didn't become about this singular person's experience."[38] Unlike the imitative or exacting repetition in the case of Schneider's piece, here repetition is highly differentiated. Indeed, this is a tactical move on Barron's part that protects the author by constructing a virtual private network of sorts that masks her identity; self-image is opaque, evasive, changeable. That is, Barron's self-story is dissected for public viewing and is in this regard recognizably selfie-like, yet at the same time the intimate history is delivered as capable of embodiment by seemingly anybody, and the linear narrative established in the first half, even if delivered by multiple actors (the various choir members), displaced by a series of dramatic alternates. The through-line of the work, therefore, is not principally established through the narrative or even characters, but through the transmission of an economy of feeling from one dramatic mode to the next.

This economy of feeling, which is conveyed through the careful arrangement of song, image and story fragments, is structured in such a way that it echoes elements

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1999; J. Ellen Gainor, "Rethinking Feminism, Stanislavsky and Performance," *Theatre Topics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2002, p. 163-175.

36 Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory / Feminist Theory," art. cit., p. 84 and p. 83.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

38 Clare Barron quoted by Allegra Hobbs, "The Singing Journal-ist: Musical Draws on Teenage Diary," *Brooklyn Paper*, February 24, 2016.

of what Bernie Hogan calls the "exhibitional" dimension to online presentations of the self.[39] The play curates (or over-shares) the artifacts of Barron's teenage years, and the effect is not unlike scrolling through a personal newsfeed, dredging through the timeline to the oldest most embarrassing posts. In his analysis of online sites, Hogan describes the role of content curators—sites such as Facebook, for example—whose job it is to filter, order and make searchable the events posted by users. These curators cover over the chaos and fundamental impersonality of the digital universe. Hogan writes that in contrast to these effective operators, "Bad curation is either overwhelming or unexpectedly irrelevant."[40] Barron, acting as her own curator, performs what I playfully call an act of deliberately "bad" curation. Her play takes the contemporary concept of the exhibited self—the self as virtual commodity—but strips away the smooth veneer of digital display. We see this stripping away (which might perhaps be usefully contrasted with Schneider's splintering) in the monologue cited above from the broken Clare (now once again delivered impersonally by a choir member), which opens by focusing on the disintegration of the body itself: "My dopey nipples / The rogue, random hairs / The way my skin was already falling down and becoming / less elastic…" Bad curation in Barron's play translates as a dramaturgy of messy feelings, and misperforming bodies.

The disintegration described above is the inverse of the desire that fuels the first part of the play, which is full of the nervous joy of discovering new feelings and sensations, and at the same time, a sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of these feelings. Clare describes wanting to disappear from the world and find a place inside another person, a sentiment similar to that expressed by Schneider's A, though much more sexualized in its expression of longing.

> I want to see you tomorrow. I want to talk to you. I want to be with you tonight. I want to feel open next to you and naked next to you. I want to be exposed in your presence. Raw in your presence. I want you to hold a knife to my throat. I want to reach inside you. Crawl inside you. Sleep inside your flesh. Breathe through your mouth, your nostrils, feel your chest rise and fall as you sigh.[41]

Her desire for Josh finally empties her out; that is, it unseats her subjectivity. Shortly before the breakup, the choir intones: "Why am I so still tonight? Why am I so sad tonight? Why am I so depleted tonight?" This dullness follows shortly before the

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39   Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media," art. cit., p. 378.

40   *Ibid.*, p. 381.

41   Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

breakup, where desire is replaced by "overwhelming sadness,"[42] the body falls apart, personhood falls apart. The song that follows Josh's rejection of Clare, which occurs shortly after the passage just cited, is given great urgency in the stage directions: "The choir sings their bruised, bloody hearts out," with the lyrics: "I am uprooted. I am beaten. I am bruised. I am dying."[43] Clare later states that "I'm so quiet it's like I don't exist at all."[44] The play is characterized throughout by Clare's affective yearning not just for another body but moreover to fully feel—and own—her own body. That is, there is a dialectical (oscillatory) tension in the work between releasing individuated experience across a collective of bodies and selves, and the desire to constitute a self that has clear and certain borders.

If the multi-iterative choir of the first part of the play evokes an ironic social networking of the self, albeit by anachronistically analogue means, then the shift to dramatic realism that follows exposes the bare, raw and painful experience that underlies this. The scene that features Barron focuses on a sexual encounter within which consent is uncertain.

Guy – I said, I want to fuck you. I find you very sexy.

Clare – (*mumbles, stumbles, etc.*) Oh. Yeah, um I want to, too.

Guy – We don't have to if you don't want to.

Clare – No, I want to. (*They return to furiously making out.*)
Just so you know, I haven't really done...that much...

Guy – Really?

Clare – Yeah.

Guy – I don't believe you.

Clare – It's true. I mean, I've done a lot, but not like...stuff.

Guy – I feel like you're very experienced.

[...]
(He starts to go down on her.)
Guy – Is this okay?

Clare – Yes

Guy – Does it feel good? *(She makes a face like what the fuck.)*

Clare – Yes

Guy *(coming back up for air)* – What'd you say?

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42 This phrase is seen in the image on page 18 in Barron's script. Also visible in images projected during the 2016 season at Bushwick Starr.

43 Clare Barron, *I'll Never Love Again*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

CLARE – I said, it feels good.

(*Clare squeezes him with her legs. They start to wrestle. He hits her really hard across the face. He hits her really hard across the face again.*)[45]

The discomfort of the scene extends from the sequence that preceded it where members of the choir "project grotesque drawings from Clare's journal onto the walls."[46] These drawings, which crudely sketch out the author, are the opposite of the airbrushed selfie. Completely un-ironic and painful to look at, with the repeated phrase "sadness overwhelming" appearing image after image, they draw attention to the distinction between the self as experienced and the self as presented or perceived by others.

As suggested earlier, part of what makes the play so compelling is how it evinces not only the melancholy affectivity of selfieness, but, moreover, how it relates this to what Paula van Beek calls the "self-surveillance" component of selfie culture.[47] Self-surveillance in the play is realized on both the macro and micro level: the entire play is an elaborate act of self-examination, and contained within this are various forms of such reflection. The play grows out of the diary and its accompanying drawings and self-portraits, but extends to include paradoxically fictionalized autobiographical reflection. Read from a feminist perspective, selfie culture may be understood to offer enhanced opportunities for female visibility and indeed fourth-wave feminism capitalizes on these opportunities. Derek Murray, for example, suggests that selfies constitute a "radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body."[48] Yet, at the same time, this visibility is highly culturally regulated. Selfie culture is not simply constitutive of individual selves—it is a realm that is both constructed and populated by corporate and other interests as much as it is a peer-to-peer "social network." In "real-life," visibility as a mode of social exchange relies, as Brighenti explains, on reciprocity—I see you and you, in return, see me. However in the virtual or networked realm, visibility is not only separate—we are not together in our seeing of one another—it is also often asymmetrical in terms of power.[49] Consequently, as Sarah Burke points out, "we've arrived at a moment in which commercial tactics

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45   *Ibid.*, p. 23-27.

46   *Ibid.*, p. 18.

47   Paula van Beek, *Self-surveillance: Performing the Plurality of my Feminine Experience of Self*, Master's Thesis, RMIT University, 2018.

48   Derek Murray quoted in Paula van Beek, *Self-surveillance*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

49   Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Artveillance," art. cit., p. 176.

can easily be made to look like a form of feminist resistance."[50] That is, selfie culture as much controls behavior as it promotes self-expression—there are pre-prescribed scripts for female self-expression to follow.

Barron's play presents a challenge to such scripting through its mirroring of the tension described above, oscillating dialectically between hyper-visibility and invisibility, sharing and disguise, recognition and misrecognition. Reflecting on the rise of "selfie feminism," Burke remarks:

> [P]erhaps we've reached a point at which young women's idea of female empowerment can be achieved through an aesthetic formula—one that champions feelings, insecurity, social media, selfies, and all things typically used to prove that young women are irrational, unintelligent, and self-obsessed.[51]

The implication of Burke's statement is that these "fourth-wave" feminists embrace and reclaim the characteristics that have been formerly attributed to them—"irrational, unintelligent, and self-obsessed." Certainly, the affectivity of Barron's play and its emotional rather than narrative dramaturgy reflects this disposition. Significantly, the rawness of the play adds depth to the approach, exposing the real trauma of insecurity and acknowledging the very real limits to and constraints on empowerment within selfie culture.

To return to Brecht, it is perhaps then in the historicity of self-surveillance that we find what is so particularly contemporary about Barron's dramaturgy in this play and also central to its feminist approach. On the face of it, the play exposes the deep anxieties that underlie a culture so fixated on self-presentation; the "over-sharing" is part of the joke—and the pleasure—of the play. But this kind of knowing critique is equally met, as I have suggested, by deep feeling—a mode that is closer to the "weeping with" of "dramatic theatre" that Brecht criticizes. The scene in which Barron herself played the role of the sexually coerced "Clare," for example, was like a punch to the gut, taking me back to similarly queasy encounters from my own youth. It is precisely the way in which the play brushes so closely up against the real through a realist dramatic mode in this scene that gives it its charge. Then, from these two dialectical extremes (the choir-as-multiple-self and the writer-as-originary-self), we take an oblique turn to recognizable dramatic realism but with unrecognized characters. Barron's dramaturgy seems to suggest the political necessity of both deeply felt identification

50 Sarah Burke, "Crying on Camera: 'Fourth Wave Feminism' and the Threat of Commodification," *Open Space*, May 17, 2016.

51 *Ibid.*

and intellectual critique, and indeed for a "jamming" of the system that takes place when these differential dramaturgical operating systems are uncomfortably sutured together. Certainly, theatrical feminist scholarship has recently begun to reappraise realism, Elaine Aston, for example, has recently written about the political potential of *realisms.* [52] Nonetheless, Barron's fourth-wave feminist dramaturgy of selfieness is notable for the sense in which it seeks to enhance the visibility and complexity of the female "irrational" at the same time as it deploys mechanisms of evasion and disguise.

And at the center of this is the female body itself, in its beauty, its pain, its awkwardness, its vulnerability, its strength and commitment. Barron's text is much more concerned with bodily matter than Schneider's, with smell, with touch, with sensation and *feeling*. Feelings are fierce and formidable forces in Barron's play, they are variously out of control and self-devouring. But they are also the place from which hope springs. Through privileging the sensational life of the female body Barron does more than offer a critique of cultural representations and expectations of young women in the twenty-first century. Rather, the dramaturgy produces a powerful chimera that evades easy capture.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING FOR A SELF WITHOUT EXPECTING TO FIND IT

In their discussion of metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker describe the paradoxicality of its oscillatory character: "Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find." [53] Galerie Tanja Wagner has elsewhere described this "looking for a truth without expecting to find it." [54] In the case of Schneider and Barron's works, I suggest that they are looking for a *self* without expecting to find it. The disaggregated selves in these works reflect our contemporary networked environments of selfies and surveillance, and oscillate between the emancipatory potential of shaking off fixed identity, and the desire for the material and the singular in the face of virtual multiplicities. The affectivity of this process integrates both the drive and optimism

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52 Elaine Aston, "Room for Realisms?," in Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (eds), *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 20.

53 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," art. cit., p. 5.

54 Galerie Tanja Wagner quoted in Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," art. cit., p. 7.

that comes from the possibility of gaining self-understanding, and the melancholic despair of realizing that such knowledge is always out of reach.

The oscillation that marks the metamodern does not aim for reconciliation. As Vermeulen and van den Akker remark, metamodern "practices set out to fulfill a mission or task they know they will not, can never, and should never accomplish: the unification of two opposed poles."[55] While Schneider and Barron's works do concern themselves with how one might be both singular and multiple at the same time, more importantly, they seek agency within the constitutive networks in which they operate. This agency may profit from the dispersal of selfhood in the sense that this allows for the kind of subterfuge that Barron's play performs, a creative evasion that responds to the surveillances that dominate selfie culture. That is, the very act of "looking for a self" is itself a strategic move, a cover story that allows for agency by paradoxically asserting the self through acts of foreclosure and denial.

Lastly, as noted earlier, when Matthew Causey writes of the double in contemporary mediatized performance, he relates this double for the most part to virtual / screen iterations of the actor, which the actor is then confronted with. It is through this confrontation that their subjectivity (and, by extension, the audience's) is challenged. Significant to both Schneider and Barron's works is the fact that their double/s are material rather than screen-based; the doppelganger in the former, and the choir in the latter. As I have argued, both works can be firmly located within a 21st-century mediated and mediatized paradigm, and both are attentive to the ways in which such technoculture places pressure on the subjective certainty of individuals. However, by using real bodies as doubles in this context, a certain claim is made for the agential authority of embodied selves. Indeed, it is especially significant that the artists' own bodies feature in these works. The appearance of Barron in *I'll Never Love Again* points to a reversal of sorts of the paradigm Causey articulates. That is, it is the appearance of the real that upsets the double so that in this instance, what he identifies as "uncanniness"[56] lies not with the simulation, the sign, but the simulated, the referent. The dramaturgical pivots in each of the works—the reveal of the B-side in Schneider's piece, and the replacement of the choir with dramatic realism in Barron's—help to effect this shift in perception, and at the same time illustrate the oscillatory dynamic that underpins the plays, and which I have suggested is helpfully understood to be metamodern in character.

<div style="text-align: right">EMMA WILLIS Metamodern Aesthetics of Selfieness and Surveillance</div>

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55 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
56 Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

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Notice

Dr Emma Willis is a senior lecturer in Drama at the University of Auckland. Her research interests include: spectatorship and ethics in contemporary performance, the theatre of Aotearoa New Zealand, tourism and memorial culture, metatheatrical dramaturgies, and subjectivity and community in contemporary performance. Publications include, *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship: Absent Others* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and articles in *Theatre Journal*, *Performance Research, Text and Performance Quarterly, Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* and *Theatre Research International*. She has previously published articles on the work of American performance makers Erik Ehn, Jackie Sibblies Drury and Erica Vogt.

Abstract

This article considers the impact of selfie culture on constructions of dramatic subjectivity in two works by young American theatre makers: Andrew Schneider's *WEARENOWHERE* and Clare Barron's *I'll Never Love Again*. I suggest that the nature of solo dramatic storytelling in each of these works is profoundly affected both by social media paradigms and by the surveillances that attend them. I explain how their dramaturgies reflect the sense in which contemporary selves, via social media and other technologies, are available for endless re-presentation and reconfiguration. The attitude towards disaggregated selfhood in these works is deeply ambivalent, however, and I wish to frame this ambivalence as "metamodern" in character.

Key words

meta-theatricality; meta-modernism; dramatic subjectivity; autobiographical theatre; solo theatre; new media dramaturgy; social media; Clare Barron; Andrew Schneider

Résumé

Cet article explore l'impact de la culture du selfie sur la construction de la subjectivité dramatique dans deux œuvres de jeunes artistes américains : *WEARENOWHERE* d'Andrew Schneider et *I'll Never Love Again* de Clare Barron. Dans chacune de ces œuvres, la nature de la narration dramatique en solo est profondément affectée par les paradigmes des réseaux sociaux, et par la surveillance qui en découle. Ces dramaturgies reflètent le sentiment d'un moi contemporain susceptible d'être re-présenté et reconfiguré à l'infini, en vertu des réseaux sociaux et autres technologies. La façon dont ces œuvres abordent ce moi désagrégé reste, cependant, profondément ambiguë : une ambivalence que je propose d'analyser comme « métamoderne ».

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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