

Diana López: Humanity in Network

“Human nature is determined by the multiplicity of the self.”

Edilio Peña¹

The Self and the Other

The theme of the self and the other has been a frequent motivation throughout Diana López’s career. In her new project developed in a hybrid fashion between the virtual, the gallery space and the catalogue, *101dianas, Autos, Captures and Scrolls*, the artist concentrates her investigation on identity.

Who really *is* Diana? How does she go about constructing her new work around the act, so habitual in our time, of searching for another and searching for oneself, *googling* in the unknown? One *Diana López* plays the leading role and many others are part homologues and another part homophones: their names are spelled the same, their names sound the same; but they do not live, nor *are they living* in the same ways.

What is the connection beyond the words that name them? Not an emotional bond, because they don’t know each other. Nor are they colleagues, because the images show a diversity of roles and vocations: one is a tattoo artist, a soccer player, a rock star, an architect, a psychologist, an influencer, a writer, an actor, a model, a sex worker, an Olympic athlete, and a judge. And naturally, Diana the artist: the one who *establishes* the correlation. She connects these various living women as occupying a distinct space (the internet displays those who stand out, but also shows those who are displayed).

She links them essentially in the space of this new artistic creation they all inhabit. A project about identity and alterity at the same time, where the individual identities are interwoven into a pluralized whole and formed into the true fabric: this inseparable front-and-back between Diana and the others. A particular resonance is established among them, as much as in a sonorous sense (a certain echo, a ringing out again and again of the same name) as in the sense of a strange harmony, a vague halo of the figures reverberating around each other.

The self and the other appear in López’s earlier works. At times she has incorporated different people into her performances²; other times it is the artist with herself, a self-monitoring during the unfolding of the work.³ Her trajectory reminds us that we live between the need for individuation and the reality of the collective. “The individual becomes collective, and vice versa,” said Freud in his psychology of the masses. For in the individual psychic life the other

¹ Edilio Peña. *Simular el engaño*. Ideas de Babel. October, 2022. All quotations from the original Spanish translated by the translator.

² She acted as the film director of *El ojo de...* (*The Eye of...*, 1997), encouraging various children to recognize themselves among other beings, objects, and spaces with the camera that she gave to them. She allowed them to choose their focus, to mark the boundaries of the chosen frame of everyone and nobody from the world that surrounded them, and to defend this other little world that, with the camera, they were registering and inventing: for immediate enjoyment and for delayed awareness. In the rug *Muchacha* (*Girl*, 1994), she transferred press photos of events to artisan hands that would weave the image. In the performance *A qué le tienes miedo* (*What You Are Afraid Of*, 2007) she examined real fears of members of the public, which through multiple responses (in psychological, social, or political tones) created a collective text.

³ We recall her performance *El vestido que me hicieron no me sirvió* (*The dress they made me didn’t fit*, 1990) and the video/performance *Escenas* (*Scenes*, 1992). In the action *Quescultura* (1993), the passing of time is shown through the movement of her hair, moving like an ephemeral sculpture.

appears integrated: as model, object, helper, or adversary. A particularly pertinent thought in our hyperconnected times.

López incorporates *the others*, distinct beings: reiterated and coexisting in space —real and virtual—but also plays with *the other* aspects of herself. *One* is not sufficient. *Just once* isn't either: one must return and return. We live in reiteration (a “crushed” society, according to the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard).

Some complementary pairs

Not only the pair of identity and alterity constitutes this diegetic space. Other found pairs are able to dynamize it: similar and distinct, figurative and abstract, real/bodily and virtual/immaterial, experience and metaphor, transparent and secret, what is accessible with an image and what is never fully visible. And the most important pair, the two embracing networks: that of the internet and that of art. One, electronic and virtual, from which she perceives. The other which is constructed from her imagination.

In the era of *fakes* and other deviations of the truth, it is important to say that the other *Dianas* are not *fakes*, as they are as real in their own environments as they are in the artists's world. But these *Dianas* only arrive virtually and incomplete, dismembered. Immaterial and fragmented, they give shape to a zone of inevitable secrets: 101 *dianalópezes* that are here without being all here, they are figures allusive of real people, but at the same time elusive. They are only partially revealed, they retract, they mask themselves. They remind us of that ghostly presence that French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard referred to when he wrote of the simulacrum and the simulation. It makes us reflect on this diffuse and fleeting mode in which humans confront networks, when they lose themselves or become alienated from themselves within the networks. The artist sees herself doubtfully repeated in this electronic habitat in which the self and the phantasm interact, the certain and the uncertain, where the self is confronted with those who are “similar,” but not in a human ontological sense but instead like mediated technological apparitions en route to more disembodied realities.

Portraits and Self-Portraits

In addition to the *101dianas*, the artist continues exploring her need to dialogue with *others*, this time with like-minded artists she admires. In the exhibition she includes the video -now a classic of 20th century art -, in which Dara Birnbaum reinterprets Wonder Woman, a work that has fascinated López ever since she was a student. In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-1979), Birnbaum repeats the scene of the protagonist making the swift circular movements that allow her to change her identity from a simple *working girl* into a heroine.⁴ Other forms of splitting also inspire López, like Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills*, which combine photography, the history of cinema, theatricality and performance to create images where *the self and the other* appear as duplicates, making it difficult to discern who the protagonist really is, the artist or the character. The artist Regina Vater also constructs her own unfolding self in *Tina América* (1976).

In his *Autocopias* (*Self-copies*, 1973-1975), Claudio Perna plays with the idea of the original — his own body—and with its partial reproduction by using a photocopier to record his anatomy in segments. Meyer Vaisman, in *Coins* (1989) inscribes his caricaturized portrait onto a collection of coins. In the video-sculpture *Brillar en la oscuridad* (*Shine in the Darkness*, 2000), Sandra Vivas is an inverted and fractionalized figure. Aziz+Cucher, in *Dystopia* (1994), create photographs of altered identities. And in the duo's work *María*, Diana López was their model.

⁴ “Diana Prince” was the secret identity of the heroine, who was created in 1941 by William Moulton for DC Comics.

Artists are nurtured by technological equipment, which transform their primary abilities and invent secondary, non-coercive aesthetic functions, as is natural to artistic liberty. However, they also foster ethical and political reflection over the original function of the machines and their derivations (as virtuous as they are perverse). This is what can occur with surveillance technology—this extended eye capable of pursuing and scrutinizing—when some artists appropriate it experimentally, like Julia Scher in her work *Predictive Engineering* (1993-1999)⁵, or in *The File Room* (1994) by Antoni Muntadas, and in López's *Beauty and Vigilance* (1993). Art liberated from the canonical use of vigil and control. And art to reflect on the actual uses of these technologies, from hacking to internet addictions, and corporations that spy, and governments that suppress.

The “other” can also be found in moments or states—physical or emotional— within a single self. We think of three Venezuelan artists known for their images and performances of tracking the self through space and time: Antonieta Sosa, with *Autoretrato (Self Portrait)*, 1998—a succession of small jars filled with photographs of the artist from her infancy— or her work *Mi piel (My Skin)*, 1998 in which she looks without concern with the passing of time. And Yeni and Nan's performances like *Nacimiento (Birth)*, 1979 and *Transfiguración elemento tierra (Transfiguration Element Earth)*, 1983).

Claudio Perna said in *Autocurrículum (Self Study)*, “I am. You are. He is. She is. We are. They are. [...] I was. You were. We were. [...] I will be. You will be. He and she will be...”⁶ In this simple conjugation of the verb “to be” is also a proposal for art, which finds a noticeable echo in *101dianas, Autos, Captures and Scrolls*.

In the gallery's two rooms are present both the human desire to be one, in search of certainty of oneself and one's small history, as well as the game to act as if one were another, fictionalizing multiple possible identities in this “as if” so dear to artistic creation: “as if” you had special powers, “as if” they were watching you, “as if” the photocopier could make you immortal.

(Contemporary) Art and Life

The postulated “life is more important than art” ideal of the 20th century conceptual avant-gardes continues to be updated today. But now not with just *life* - with situations like love, health or violence. Contemporary reality is marked by technologies that have a bearing—in real life—on modes of being a human. One of its centers: the longing for universal communication. And this concept of *life*, that brings with it today new accessories—as much in reality as in its thematization in art—that privileges the communicable by electronic means in order to proceed from a single person towards the whole world. Or to bring here, by means of images, those who are located out there: extending knowledge or, on a more intimate plane, shortening distances and reducing isolation. It would seem that life today belongs to those who give, receive, or have to tolerate messages, codes, acronyms, passwords. As if “being” is a “communicative being”—voluntarily or not—and as if not being one brings about forms of social marginalization and/or personal depression.

⁵ Julia Scher was an invited artist to the San Francisco Art Institute when López was a student there in the department of performance and video, led by the artists and teachers Kathy Acker, Tony Labat and Doug Hall. During that visit, Scher invited López to participate in her work *Predictive Engineering*, made at SFMoMA (1993-1999) and the results of which have been shown four different times at the museum, each time a different version as the piece is still in progress.

⁶ Claudio Perna, “Arte Social. Claudio Perna” in *Autocurrículum*, 1981. Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 2004, pg. 45.

Diana López knows that communications and identities, and life in general, exist more and more in the electro-digital world. She observes its omnipresence through apparatuses and prostheses, but also its fragilities in acting horizontally and superficially in hyper-communicative circuits that are beneficial but also overloaded. She also believes that, in addition to over-informing ourselves, they can also be insufficient, because as we increase mediated communications, we reduce live encounters.

This exhibition, which examines personal and collective existence—however atomized—precisely explores indirect relationships that are generated in mediated environments (the networks are *social* only virtually). López approaches virtual *life* with an artistic objective and at the same time with the goal to understand identity. By accessing existing figures in the universality of the network and inventing—as well as discovering—connections that allow her to intuit and “familiarize” herself with other lives, she is able to interrogate the commonplace according to which the understanding of networks is flat and empty, without emphasis or vital nuances.

Humanism...still

Although she is based in the virtual universe, López *still* transits between the human and the human, giving a place to an ethical and aesthetic space that differentiates between human and machine, letting a *person* be a person (a *Diana* or anything else) and showing that humans still control technology. This project exists as a path that straddles on one side the idea of the “global village,” that Canadian philosopher Marshall MacLuhan developed in response to the invasive presence of radio and television, and on the other side, the disquieting future of *cyborgs* and hybrid beings. Her installations of the *101dianas* are derived from hybrid beings, yes, but from the terrain of the artistic and imaginary where, like in dreams, everything is possible. In this world of invention there is a fine line, but it is protected by the favorable ambiguity of art: between reality and metaphor, between digital and object-like, between presentation and representation. In this liminal space the hybrid being is not a *cyborg* but rather an existence in the tradition of the portrait and the self-portrait, an entity of invention in the composite lineage of assemblage and collage (which is now digital, naturally).

This work, marked as it is by information technologies, doesn't identify with philosophies of the so-called post-humanism, which are based in biotechnologies. Far from the “informational being” of English anthropologist Gregory Bateson, as it is one thing to utilize resources, bodily extensions that science and technology place within human reach—and within the privileged reach of the artist—and another is the post- and trans-humanist thought, according to which the line is becoming even finer and less distinguishable between the real and the virtual, between human, networks, robots, and cyborgs.

Exploring Language

Although the three groupings that comprise the exhibition are based in these vocabularies, López utilizes them as a means to expand upon her resources (video, drawing and performance) and in consideration of the problems that she addresses in her work, because it is the concept that orients her selection of the appropriate medium.

She says, “I'm analogue, not digital.”⁷ Though while not being a digital artist (like one could call creators as diverse as Waldemar Cordeiro, Manuel Felguéz, Pipilotti Rist, Antoni Aba, Damien Hirst, Arcangelo Constantini, among others) she is feeling a new creative enjoyment by working with a cybernetic vocabulary. She uses this vocabulary not only as media, or as a means for critical reflection, but also as a kind of *thesaurus* of cyberspace that is varied in structures and

⁷ This quote and the succeeding quotes are cited from Diana López in conversation with the author.

connections, that serves as a laboratory for experiments. She combines plasma screens for her work *Captures* and LED Mesh screens for the piece *Scrolls*, exploring these electronic experiences. “Without electricity this virtual world wouldn’t exist” she notes—like a classical painter would say: without light, the fine arts wouldn’t exist. Networks and electricity assist her in her investigation, and through this assistance she has woven this electro-digital poetic plot into three bodies of work: *NFTs*, *Scrolls*, and *Captures*.

101 Dianalopez NFT

101 combinations of eyes, noses, mouths, gestures, and rictus interweave portraits and self-portraits, fragments and superimpositions, offering new relief and density— by turns dramatic, humorous, or subtly monstrous—to the figures thus constructed. All of the *Dianas* originate in the domain of the real, pass into the virtual, and are converted into beings of a fiction that send us back to look at and think about human physiognomies, precise or faint traces, smiles or laments.

López is also masked, exchanging sections of her face for those of others. “From my personal experience, I try to mask myself,” she confesses. But while she plays at hiding, she is also certain that her reiteration, and her image—however shattered or dissolved—becomes omnipresent. “Each image has a piece of me,” she affirms. At the same time, these images are *others* because the repetitions are never exact: small additions or transposed features create divergences for distinctive illusions. Although reason needs to anchor itself to the similar, art grows out of the breach of the unlikeness.

Two aspects of language are emphasized. On one side, the character of NFTs—Non-Fungible Tokens—in the art market are understood as “electronic identifications that certify the authenticity of a unique work and accredit its property,”⁸ entities of the world of cryptocurrency for commercial exchange and collecting.

On the other side, there is a certain affinity between the NFTs published in www.fxhash.xyz/generative/21933 and the thematics of the exhibition, such as that of an initial entity interacting with other like entities, that of “a one,” “an original” that is multipliable in and through virtual spaces. If López is, in this scenario, the original (and the originating) artist who composes the various iterations, each one of the *Dianas* is by default an original through its own individuality. Each NFT thus also functions as an original.

NFTs and cryptocurrencies seem marked by volatility. This current uncertainty of the market would also have certain parallels with the growing volatility in the evaluations of people—their identities, individualities, character traits—when they reach us precisely through social networks, and/or when they are diluted in the distinct forms of the social masses.

Scrolls / Displacements

These on-screen displacements are animations presented on four vertical LED screens, “fragments and abstractions originating from the catalogue of the *Dianalópez* pulled from virtual searches from various search engines like Google, Bing, Duck Duck Go, Dog Pile, and from social networks like Facebook, Instagram, Tinder and more recently the AI ChatGPT,” says the artist.

Here there is a form of play, a back-and-forth between distinguishable traces (figurative, realistic) and abstract zones. They act like a progressive staging (semi-visible, semi-masked) between the self that is López the Venezuelan artist and the other *DianasLópez* that, although their partial appearance *still* exists here, they are *already* a constitutive part of the created

⁸ Teresa Sesé, “Los NFTs han venido para quedarse,” *La Vanguardia*. Barcelona, 10-04-2022

space. A link is being forged between the self and the ghost, and such syntheses between the real *Dianas* and the ghostly apparitions are an essential part of the mystery. These screens open themselves up like windows towards what is never quite attainable: the completeness of the figures, the recognition of identities, the social certainties.

Captures / Capturas

In a work created from screen captures, it is not the faces or bodies that are featured, but words. Arranged in vertical and horizontal displacements, names keep appearing like ancient palimpsests—new signs over old calligraphies. But the work's support is not an archaic document, aged parchment, but rather video, an ideal medium to show time, progression, *process*.

A dematerialized work, it exists in the fast moving visuality of the words that give name to different people. The image becomes denser and more obscured, ever stranger due to the saturation of the layered texts. As López comments, "everything is an excess, even the repetition of the name. There is a narcissism in these networks." She recognizes the insecurities present in cyberspace (if the internet promises precision, it can also create de-individualization).

Even the 19th century thinker Arthur Schopenhauer warned of the dangers of receiving excessive information. Eric Wiener applies the philosopher's ideas in his analysis of contemporary networks, writing "the excess of data acts like a thick fog that clouds our vision. [...] The internet has exposed this fundamental problem, which is not new."⁹ This video, presented on a vertical screen that simulates smart phone or tablet screens, is thematically related to the "thick fog" that obscures vision and sensation. In the lack of moderation—displayed in networks as well as in real life—all definition becomes blurry.

But here accumulation is not only a theme, it is also a structure. And the work *clearly* portrays the condition of excess. The opacity of *Captures* alludes just as much to the *tempo* of the networks, of the unstoppable appearances, as to the space of the coexistent/insistent, making us sense superimposed rumbles—aural and visual—of the congealing of names and the overlapping of individualities.

This new project by Diana López offers visions of art and contemporary life. It proposes a playful investigation of identity and alterity, where all the *Dianas* look like each other without looking alike at all, where no one is complete without the missing parts of the others.

An open work: a fully impossible face, and an art that makes us think.

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⁹ Eric Wiener quoted in Enrique Zamorano, *Medium*. ACV. 12-07-2022