



Towards Knowing the Unknown: Noelle Celeste on Avatar Creation and Empathetic Digital Spaces

Julia Wong

The first time I saw Noelle Celeste's work was during a group critique at the end of a course on the role of theory in visual art. We stood in a darkened room watching a compilation of appropriated media footage. In her work *Dreamscape*, footage from *The Great Gatsby* (2013), *Spring Breakers* (2012), and Rihanna at the 2015 Met Gala were overlaid on top of each other, fighting for our attention, reflecting a reality of the oversaturation of imagery in our day to day lives. I was struck by the way her work seemed so familiar and alien at the same time—her use of popular media coupled with pseudo-philosophical narration evoked both tender familiarity and self-reflexive discomfort in a pursuit of capitalistic perfection. Though Celeste continues to explore relationships and narratives within technology, her practice has evolved from utilizing appropriated material to a more organic approach.

"It didn't really have the effect that I wanted," Celeste says about her appropriation work. "For some reason I wanted people to be emotionally invested in the characters that I was portraying, but no one really cared."

This all changed when Celeste began using avatars in her work in 2018. The avatars, editing, and composition of her videos reflect an aesthetic from an earlier digital age.

"This low-brow aesthetic has a really wide appeal, and is hypo-realistic, as opposed to hyper-realistic. It's [a] very 2000s Internet style, like *Sims* or *Second Life*," Celeste says. "[This] makes people feel nostalgic for a simpler time, it resonates in that way. It brings us back to that feel-

ing that we have that power, that we've conquered something great and it's not the opposite way around."

Celeste's avatars reflect this ambiguous power dynamic between the user/creator and technological product. Avatars are particularly loaded in their function—avatar bodies act as transliterations of their creator, and enact their will in digital spaces. This blurring of the avatars' functional ability is further obscured by their existential ruminations, and deteriorating state, often employed in Celeste's work. Celeste cites American artist and filmmaker Ryan Trecartin, German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, the avatar creations of Cécile B. Evans, as well as Ed Atkins as her artistic influences. Celeste mentions that Atkins helped her discover CrazyTalk, the program that she uses now in avatar creation. Other programs she uses are Adobe Premiere and After Effects.

"The program that I use is really rudimentary, it's not very advanced so you only have certain options that you can use as a base. You can manipulate it, but it's hard to do that without screwing everything else up," Celeste says of the program CrazyTalk. "I don't mind the constraints. A lot of the time the dialogue comes from the constraints of a program, like [my avatar] can talk about how she isn't fully realized and she's mad about it or something."

In *Untitled (Weather Girl)*, an avatar who appears to be fulfilling the role of a weather forecaster begins by telling the viewer that it will be warm this weekend, before reflecting on the transient nature of her existence. She says,

Untitled (Weather Girl), video still, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.



“Warmth doesn’t give you a sunburn. I—I’ve never had a sunburn before.” The screen begins to glitch and the avatar re-appears with drifting dust particles and light flares, reflecting on the fact that she does not understand the concept of warmth. “I only understand weather through numbers. But you understand numbers as light. You can feel light. I’m not photosensitive,” she laments.

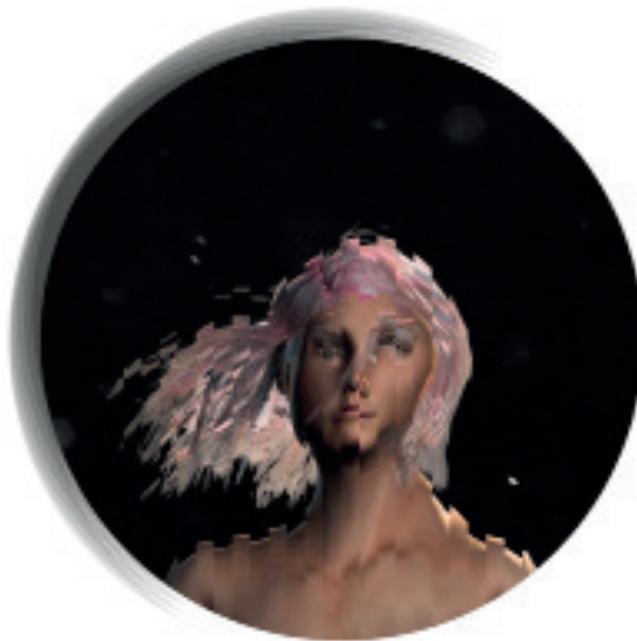
“I wanted to create a character and give them agency,” says Celeste about her avatars. “I think the dialogue contributes to a sense of her own consciousness. She contemplates her existence but in a virtual world. My script has a lot of technological terms in it, but a viewer might hear it and in some way reinterpret it and imagine it in some way that relates to them. [The dialogue] came out from me reading how X-rays work. How we have to take out our computers and our electronics and separate them, and this has something to do with corruption. When I’m learning about how things work on the Internet or I’m learning a new program, I’ll find something interesting or a random glitch and I’ll be fixated forever.”

One such fixation was the discovery of an Adobe pre-set of light flares—a digital replication of what had been an

accidental occurrence of natural light through a camera lens. This pre-set stuck out to Celeste because it lacked a functional purpose, seemingly created for the sole enjoyment of the person who created the program. These light flares, alongside dust particles, and empty spaces are often used in Celeste’s work as emblematic of the void-space of the Internet.

“We don’t necessarily have to make so many mistakes when it comes to information and knowledge, [and the Internet] kind of undermines us in that way, so there’s a feeling that we’re left with the unknown, the unknowing. All that’s left for us, really, is this making meaning out of things versus this solidified knowledge,” she explains. “It’s also often why my dialogue comes out of nowhere. A lot of the times it’s not very linear, there are no real conclusions. It’s [the avatar] in a spur of the moment feeling of an existential crisis or combatting a trauma.”

In *A_passive_aggressive_conversation.mp4*—a two-channel video on separate screens—two deteriorating entities are in a heated conversation on the nature of their being. On one screen the back of an avatar’s head is pictured with a dripping skin-like texture that eventually co-opts the



Morph, video still, *A_passive_aggressive_conversation*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

entire screen. On the other is a forward-facing avatar who is beginning to pixelate and becomes more and more abstract.

“This piece visually communicates transience best—the two panel screens and the peephole in the beginning. We’re being constantly watched, and everything is being penetrated. Even if we can imagine the Internet being this square space like a computer or a screen, it’s being penetrated,” Celeste says.

The two entities in the piece argue about the futility of resisting their deterioration. One of them accuses the other of being “pretentious” for resisting their fate, saying, “You just get absorbed as fragments of scattered information, you’ll probably be ugly for a bit, but eventually you’ll be a smooth flat image again.” Celeste cites Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” as inspiration for the script, specifically the line that reads, “Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum...”

“I was obsessed with this idea that we’re constantly absorbing pixels. It’s kind of beautiful, but a little bit scary,” says Celeste.

When I ask Celeste why she wants the viewer to care about her avatars, she responds by saying this:

“With the Internet, it emphasizes this need to create meaning for people and the Internet in turn emphasizes what is meaningful to them. Even if you disagree with what someone is trying to impose, the fact that we are able to analyze what they’re saying for ourselves is a way that we don’t have to normalize certain ideologies. It’s a more empathetic and open space. That feeling of caring for [the avatar] is an empathy and awareness of someone else’s meaning or version of reality. Maybe if we’re open to this idea that we know less than we actually know, we’d be less imposing of ideologies.”

In a time when contemporary anxiety around the scope of technology and digital intelligence is so high, Noelle Celeste’s avatar work reminds us of the ability for technology to consider fundamentally human notions of existence and emotion, and argues for the possibility of digital spaces to be poetic and nuanced.