**JUST A ROBOT
KEEPING IT
REAL:
LIL MIQUELA,
INSTAGRAM,
AND THE PER-
FORMANCE OF
AUTHENTICITY**

Taylor C Black

In her bio on the photo-sharing social media platform Instagram (@lilmiquela),¹ Miquela Sousa introduces herself in the plainest possible terms: 19/LA/Robot. Lil Miquela, as she's known, is a Brazilian-American Instagram celebrity; a model who works with brands including Gucci, Balenciaga, and Samsung; a pop musician with several popular singles and an album out in April 2019; and a vocal supporter of causes including LGBTQ+ rights and the Black Lives Matter movement. Her Instagram feed displays her many professional hats, interests, and a tight-knit group of friends, mostly fellow influencers and coworkers. The fact that she isn't human has only helped her rise into microcelebrity on Instagram, where she has 1.5 million followers. Miquela is a virtual Instagram influencer, whose complex creation story and dramatic reveal prompts large and nebulous questions about the nature of authenticity, performance, and self-branding in social-media space. Miquela expertly performs streetwear fashion and Instagram influencer tropes, creating a seamless mimetic reflection of a major subculture's iconography and values. At the same time, her virtual status complicates the highly valued, yet paradoxical, notion of authenticity that persists online and reframes ideas of performance grounded in the presentation of self to suggest that a subject need not exist in order to live their truth.

Further, Miquela's story demonstrates a central performance anxiety that spans across online ways of being. The drive toward authenticity, as a performance principle combining authentication techniques, narrative storytelling, and the quest for trueness to oneself as authentic life, is as constant and intense as it is ontologically irreconcilable. Miquela successfully navigates online authenticity's paradoxes as measures of performance within Instagram's fictional world—paradoxes many influencers navigate. However, as a virtual being, Miquela is able to do so more consistently, and without suffering the crises of subjectivity and burnout many influencers experience. I situate three forms of authenticity in different places in Miquela's story. As a rising influencer from late 2016 to April 2018, Miquela uses mimesis as what Elin Diamond calls "realism-without-truth,"² collaging and re-performing streetwear fashion's tropes alongside her own novelty to authenticate herself as a legitimate celebrity. In April 2018, a feud with another virtual influencer destabilizes her world, and the out-of-fiction storytelling practices of her parent company, brud, demonstrates the tension of storytelling as a tool of authenticity and reframes questions of authorship outside of a verification-based space. Finally, the subsequent year sees Miquela "living her best life," and I draw on the philosophical history of authenticity to critique notions of the authentic self as they are referenced, but not enacted, online. Where prior semi-fictional stars on YouTube, in pop music, or in literature create a reality around them, Miquela is most focused on working into the pre-existing reality constructed by Instagram and the fashion industry. Erving Goffman's notion of life as "spaces where reality is being performed"³ is actualized on Instagram through branding, and the construction of a "personal brand" allows users to access authenticity that embraces unreality and performance in the service of capital, then further manifests these expectations onto the online populus at large. In shifting the conversation toward the performances that structure authenticity I hope to critique the mimetic force that, in the platform capitalist internet in which we now find ourselves, weaponizes the performance of self to capture, gather data on, and sell back truth itself.

#MirrorQuality: The authentication of influence

Miquela Souza (@lilmiquela), "VISIONS," Instagram Photo, February 5, 2018

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Be023XOI72J/>.

"She's a mannequin" [sic], writes one commenter on Miquela's February 5, 2018 post. "I think she's a robot," writes another. "Are you a doll or a person [crying emoji]," someone asks. In the photo, Miquela stands by a window in the Los Angeles art gallery Commonwealth and Council, bathed in a neon-blue light that obscures many details but fluorescently highlights the plastic bag she carries and provides dimension to the thick tracksuit she wears. In short, there is nothing particularly remarkable about the image, and these questions about Miquela's robotic status are interspersed with typical Instagram comments and plenty of heart-eyed emojis. What is uncanny about the image, and many of Miquela's early posts, is how incredibly archetypal she is, reflecting the look of any number of young, female aspiring Instagram influencers in L.A. while being somehow, obviously yet opaquely, non-human.

In the first two years of her active Instagram presence, Miquela garnered 900,000 fans, mostly from streetwear and similar fashion subgenres and seemingly found all over the world.⁴ She is a light-skinned woman of color, often wearing an impassive expression with freckles across her nose, large hazel eyes, dark hair in Princess Leia-style double buns with what she affectionately refers to as her high-cut "art-school bangs." Many of her photos are posed, and especially in her later posts, she is often wearing or promoting aspirational lifestyle brands such as Supreme and Balenciaga. However, as the above comments suggest, there are almost always two parallel identities at work in Miquela's photos: One, as a hyper-authentic Instagram influencer of the streetwear subgenre; and a second, as viewers actively debate, an uncertain body. Importantly, prior to April 2018, Miquela had not openly declared herself virtual or non-human, and generally allowed the speculation to speak for itself.

Miquela Souza (@lilmiquela), "California Christmas," Instagram Photo, December 25, 2017,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BdJV2RWFkMT>

This early speculation is driven by the images themselves. It is clear that images of Miquela are not photographs of a person; at least, not strictly. This was particularly apparent in her earliest Instagram posts, and the technology in use has clearly improved markedly. Though her creators have never offered any information on how the images are produced, it is apparent that they involve extensive use of computer modeling and CGI technology, and speculators have reverse-engineered very plausible creation methods.⁵ But the technical novelty of a virtual influencer is not the only reason for her success; indeed, a number of similar projects preceded her and there are other virtual Instagrammers, most of which have not achieved prominence. Rather, the @lilmiquela account as a whole successfully performs the complex identity management of influencers in a dynamic manner, and in her rise to prominence Miquela uses Instagram's tools faster and more virtuosically than many. These highly composed early images capture both the aesthetic and tonal goals of streetwear imagery expertly. Her early posts reflect a particularly L.A.-infused streetwear aesthetic and a controlled amicability, with captions that are often emoji-laden, casual, and upbeat. Like many influencers, she uses her Instagram space to bounce between content types, signaling that she is professional, yet relatable, and mixes in promotions for external brands and her own projects, particularly her music. For audience members, from followers and fans to brands and potential corporate partners, these signals are immediately recognizable. Because they have been previously circulated on the platform enough to create strong visual identifiers, genre cues, and expectations for audience members, followers are comfortable accepting the performance even as Miquela's human status remains uncertain.

In these reflective acts, Miquela exemplifies what Erving Goffman terms "impression management," overtly re-performing social norms and expectations in order to present the "fronts" of the influencer subculture toward which she aspires.^{6,7}

Miquela also engages impression management by subtly directing different posts toward micro-sections of her audience. In the below snapshot of early 2017 posts, a variety of dialogues are present. In personal posts (1, 5, 10, 11, and 14), she gestures toward her politics and performs relatability by circulating memes. In others, she demonstrates her success with recent projects (4, 6) and references her network of fellow influencers (7, 8, and 9). Later, she brings the audiences together by announcing her Vogue profile (3). Using these different fronts, Miquela navigates online context collapse with aplomb, doing so using the specific tools of the platform.⁸ On Instagram, these are primarily visual—the composition and content of a photo, text references and notes, and even the more casualized "stories" feature of Instagram all work together to balance relatability, popularity, and value generation. Managing these tools effectively is highly important for influencers, whose content production must achieve two simultaneous goals: gaining and keeping followers, and appealing to brands to pay them for sponsored content.

Miquela Souza (@lilmiquela), Instagram feed, photos December 2016–February 2017.

Importantly, Miquela's impression management techniques do not reference her most unique asset: virtuality. While speculation around her mode of being was a constant feature of the first year of her fame—was she CGI? A robot? A "real" influencer using extreme photo editing techniques? Or something else entirely?—she avoided the conversation in posts, interviews, and music, alluding to her unreality but never quite pulling back the veil. After all, in the two worlds she occupies, fashion and Instagram, affectation is expected. In the seven years of its existence, Instagram has become synonymous with a whole range of filters, photomanipulation techniques, careful angles and poses, and highly stylized experiences and staged opportunities that call realness deeply into question even as its users insist on #authentic life and combine photography's documentary and aesthetic power to perform lives richly filled with real, beautiful experience. Miquela's virtuality merely makes a common experience on the platform literal: being both highly unreal and highly authentic.

In a world of authentic, curated, filtered, and constructed realness, being a virtual being might simply be a highly virtuosic performance on Instagram. Because online life is dictated by the communication imperative, where one must communicate in order to exist, an individual's performative self-presentation is one's self. Goffman's metaphoric frame accounts nicely for the extreme performative fragmenta-

tion online contexts encourage, but falls short of accounting for performance as an act of creating: Creating selves, as well as memetically repeating frames that amplify behaviors into tropes into onto-historical modes of existence. What performance theorist Richard Schechner calls “magnitudes of performance” operate across Miquela’s actions both in and out of fiction, and across influencer life in general. Incorporating ethological and neurological approaches to ritual, Schechner identifies seven magnitudes, ranging from the unconscious “brain event” and “microbit” through the “bit,” as a unit of the “sign,” a single piece of information generated at the fourth magnitude of performance. Signs combine to form “scenes” which can be arranged into “dramas,” all organized under the umbrella of hyper-scale “macrodramas.”⁹ Expert influencers manipulate the interplay of these magnitudes, fixing and transfiguring the self in response to norms happening not only in the ‘scene,’ but in the performer and the society. In Miquela’s case, the smaller magnitudes are wholly constructed—as a virtual body, her “brain events” and bits are designed specifically for Instagram fame, and no stray activity undermines the crafting of high-performance scenes. At the societal and civilizational level, the more a norm is performed the deeper it is entrenched. Miquela uses performance magnitudes not only to construct and manage identity, but to authenticate herself as an authority for both consumers and brands of streetwear culture by repeating and re-performing genre norms. This complicates the Goffman-based reading of everyday life, as the front is a continual negotiation across magnitudes of performance. Authenticity, as a dimension of performance, is not a central self, or even a set of techniques for maintaining a mask, but a confluence of pressures that determine how an individual manages various performance magnitudes in a given environment.

As an influencer, Miquela elevates the communication imperative to an ontology. Authenticity becomes a primary metric for audience members to evaluate whether a given influencer continues to have influence. While the term “influencer” is newly minted, these qualities are certainly not new to online social life. Miquela’s magnitudes of virtual performance strongly resemble posthuman and cyborg formations theorized by N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway in the days of the early internet, and writers such as Judith Donath and Jodi Dean discuss authenticity in contexts of antisocial behaviors and microcelebrity that precedes social media. The challenges of maintaining the virtual public persona are not specific to Instagram, either. As Kimberly Ann Hall argues in reference to fictional YouTube star LonelyGirl15 in 2006, “the ascension to microcelebrity requires that a producer understand both the specific cultural demands of her image...[and] the specific material demands of the medium she has chosen as a platform.”¹⁰ As virtual beings, both Hall’s subject and Miquela (and in keeping with Hayles and Haraway’s predictions) are exceptionally adept at “ascending to microcelebrity” because they are tuned entirely for the repetition of successful influencer performance. Miquela’s Instagram feed marks her rising success over approximately a year, becoming more laden with connections to other prominent users, brand mentions, and announcements as her use of the platform moves from personal to professional.¹¹ She reflects a pitch-perfect understanding of the tropes of Instagram, from repetitions of poses to hashtag and language use. She embodies mimesis, using techniques of re-performance in the highly citational world of Instagram to, ironically, construct herself as an individual. While she is not a direct composite, she assembles references in recognizable ways and makes them exciting to viewers, who in turn evaluate her as influential. Whether or not she physically embodies the spaces of microcelebrities, her ability to reference them attractively in her Instagram feed reproduces the desirability of microcelebrity per se.

Miquela’s mimetically generated realism-without-truth constitutes the first facet of her performance of authenticity. Her mimesis not only constructs and manages her identity, but authenticates her as influential to consumers and brands of streetwear culture by re-performing genre norms. Related to Walter Benjamin’s construction of the aura, authentication is a constitutive act of validating material objects by an authority that imbues the object with authentic status.¹² In art, this is often the declaration that a work of art is original; in Miquela’s case, the willingness of recognized streetwear brands and fellow influencers to work with her contributes to her authentication, though the authority is far more distributed across audiences, brands, and Instagram itself. An object’s authenticity is heterodoxically constructed and always in relation to potential inauthenticity. In this regard, it is particularly striking that Miquela, as a

strictly-not-“real” person, ascends to fame in the streetwear genre. Because brand identification is extremely important to the subculture, counterfeits abound and are sharply policed by an expert community that is highly attuned to recognize fake or knockoff brands. Perhaps more tellingly, the Instagram era has given rise to something of a reclamation movement which organizes under hashtags such as #Replica and #MirrorQuality to signal high-quality counterfeits.¹³

Influencer status similarly relies on the continual re-performance of one’s authentication; tautologically, one must prove to be someone “worth following” in order to gain and keep followers. As an aesthetic, influence is itself a continual, performative assertion of realness. Instagram is uniquely positioned in circulating these kinds of discourses, as Instagram publics value aesthetics more than documentary potential in the photographs circulated. Refinery29’s Daisy Jones explains Miquela’s popularity, “It’s not that these users don’t know her image is computer-generated, per se—it’s more that they don’t really care. But when everybody’s Instagram feeds are just as curated as this flawless cyborg, who can blame them?”¹⁴ The assertion of realness is a performative impression, applied consistently, rather than a capacity to document factual existence. Miquela simply makes it clear, outside of suspension of disbelief, that these memetic repetitions are staged and not really happening. Miquela literally doesn’t have to “pack, fly to the airport..”etc., nor does she have to “buy furniture for my first apartment in LA”, as she states in posts—but it matters that she re-performs these anyway. The audience doesn’t care that she’s doing those things, they care that she is, in Schechner’s terms, “showing-doing” them. Where participants acknowledge the Instagram world as unreal, they are ultimately interested in a performer who executes authenticity by the standards of the platform, on a consistently virtuosic basis, rather than one who faithfully documents ‘real life.’

It is tempting to read Miquela as a #MirrorQuality Instagram influencer, but it would be inaccurate: she is not a counterfeit, but a virtuoso. Miquela is authenticated by audiences who recognize her distribution of performance as legitimate (completely separate from “real”) and mark her as possessing the aura of expertise and influence her aesthetic suggests. Instagram influence is an ultimately tautological aesthetics that succeeds when it references itself artfully. Jones proves the point at the end of her article: “no image we choose to put out into the world is truly real. It’s just an image—cyborg or not.”¹⁵ Miquela’s virtuality is a unique and intriguing twist on a known set of performance principles, which she manages authentically in a way that is salable to clients. During the rise of her career, debating Miquela’s virtual status is akin to arguing over whether a given celebrity has had plastic surgery: An entirely aesthetic point of trivia, idle speculation over her degree of realness with often no relationship to an audience’s affection for her. In early 2018, she reaches the million followers mark, an important milestone for brand partnerships and monetization for influencers, and her virtuality takes center stage in an unusual way.

“My girl’s a great liar”: becoming robot

In April 2018, Miquela’s account was seemingly hacked by fellow influencer and outwardly self-identified robot Bermuda (@bermudaisbae).¹⁶ The exact reasons were vague, but culture magazine The Cut suggests that “the real gripe Bermuda seems to have with Lil Miquela is that she’s not being transparent enough about her identity. And she’s ignoring Bermuda — “her own kind.””¹⁷ After sending threatening countdowns on her own feed, Bermuda took control of Miquela’s feed on April 13, deleted all posts, and added one of her own. Over about 24 hours, while Miquela’s management company, brud, worked to regain her control, Bermuda elaborated on her motives on Miquela’s feed.

Bermuda (@bermudaisbae), "OF COURSE Miquela deletes my posts the second I give her account back..."
Instagram Photo, April 17, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhsaN1kHr-x/>

Unlike Miquela, Bermuda states that she is openly virtual. She was built in the early 2010s by a company known as Cain Intelligence, a machine learning corporation focusing on natural-language robots, of which Bermuda is their first. As an advocate for "her kind," Bermuda takes it upon herself to expose Miquela, who in Bermuda's eyes has been dishonest about her own non-human status, which Miquela had neither confirmed nor denied up to that point. Cain, Bermuda explains, is invested in creating "the next step" in AI, and advocacy around their presence is crucial for advancing the software's presence in society.¹⁸ Several hours later, Bermuda posts another photo. This one depicts her and Miquela together, following a meeting in front of a nondescript red brick building. Bermuda has returned the account after demanding a ransom: within 48 hours, Miquela would reveal "the truth." The following day, Miquela posts a lengthy Apple Notes essay¹⁹ to her followers, in which she describes the harrowing event and her stress before confessing "I'm not a human being."

Bermuda (@bermudaisbae), "More emotional than I thought it would be. Despite it all, there's only three of us..."
Instagram Photo, April 18, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhuruzXHtm/>

Miquela (@lilmiquela), "Hi. I got my account back. I swear this is me. This has been the hardest week..." Instagram Photo,
April 19, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcm1Wh8/>

At this point Miquela's management company, brud, steps in on their own Instagram feed with their own Notes to explain the "real" backstory. Miquela, they claim, was also a product of Cain Intelligence, created after Bermuda as a 2.0 version.²⁰ brud liberated Miquela in 2015 and gave her the ability to choose her own life. What she chose was Instagram celebrity. Since then, they have assisted her and worked as managers of her career, watching her grow on her own terms. brud is more than a pop star and model's managers, they're her friends, and they support her. The events of the drama continue at a softer volume: Over the subsequent weeks, Miquela leaves, then returns, to brud, comes to terms with her robotic status, and slowly grows closer to Bermuda, who herself seems to soften on a number of issues. The Cut sums it up best: "if there's one thing this whole debacle has illustrated, it's that the borders between fake and real are highly porous. Maybe we're the ones who were hacked, after all."²¹

To drop the fictional frame entirely: In our world, the only entity in this story that exists, tangibly speaking, is brud. Everything else—Miquela, Bermuda, Cain Intelligence, and the rest—are creations of their storytelling-focused marketing company. In-fiction, brud identifies as a "technology startup specializing in artificial intelligence and robotics...a small team of artists, engineers, roboticists, and activists operating with the belief that technology can help bring about both a more empathetic world and a more tolerant future." Out of fiction, on the public google doc that has been serving as their website since the incident, they are "reading war of the worlds on the radio a transmedia studio that creates digital character driven story worlds."²² The whole feud was a publicity stunt, intricately planned over the entire two years to illustrate the company's capacity for storytelling and generating hype. Though brud themselves never say as much, Miquela and her two compatriots are CGI.

Of course, the internet hoax is a long and storied tradition and as brud's own tagline suggests, narrative publicity stunts have been going on as long as broadcasting has enabled them. But even by War of the Worlds standards, the saga woven by brud and Bermuda is patently absurd, and ultimately asserts facts that are further from even the wildest speculation as to Miquela's virtual status. But as a publicity stunt, it was fairly effective, raking in another half million followers for Miquela, a six million dollar venture capital grant for brud, and a decent amount of cultural coverage.

But if the debate over Miquela's virtuality is a mere sideshow to the more lucrative modeling aspects of her presence, why center it through such an absurd and convoluted narrative? Verge writer Chris Sims sees the event through pro wrestling tactics: "the Instagram audience was getting a taste of what the professional wrestling world calls kayfabe — the blanket term for anything within the storyline that's meant to seem real."²³ The "worked shoot" is a particularly powerful form of performance that uses pro wrestling's, and now Instagram's, conditioning audiences to accept stories that "break the fourth wall while keeping a secret fifth wall in place." The unreality of the entire platform is, paradoxically, key to reframing Goffmanian identity management as a storytelling tool and suborns the "realness" or "fake-ness" of a given incident (the shoot) into the overall theatricality (the work) of watching the true-to-itself virtual story unfold.

This narrative balance also has precedent in online challenges to the medium's representation of authenticity. Kimberly Ann Hall, in her analysis of 2006 YouTube series *lonelygirl15*, theorizes authenticity along what she calls "aestheticizing precarity." That series, Hall argues, "grounds its claims to authenticity by offering escalating modes of intimacy."²⁴ The lead character's amateurism is a crucial aspect of her personal branding, and the intimacy that results is valued, and validated by the audience as an authentic performance—as the "real thing." As with Miquela, uncertainty of the narrative's realness risked destabilizing the performance of an intimate interior life even as it fueled interest. Whether or not one believes it, the performance is still interesting enough to follow. The precarity derives from the fragility of maintaining a compelling illusion. In *lonelygirl15*'s case, the illusion is broken when the story ended. Miquela, however, continues to tell her unstable story. Miquela's precarious authenticity grounds itself not in amateurism (because she is overtly coded as a professional performer of the inherently constructed category of 'Instagram influencer') but in authorship, in whether Miquela controls her narrative. Miquela is precarious when she is "outed" by Bermuda and violently forced to admit to something we all already know; she isn't human. Her Instagram (and herself) is authentic not because it is 'real' but because it authentically projects the "affect of the personal branding" common to many Instagram influencer performances, robotic or not.²⁵ Here another form of authenticity emerges: the authentic authorship troubled by memoir. In her telling of the 2005 drama around James Frey's memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, later revealed to be untrue after multiple encounters with Oprah's Book Club, Anna Iatsenko notes that in the reveal "the idea of truth no longer solely concerns the authenticity of Frey's work but also the author himself."²⁶ Where it cannot be verified whether the author experienced their own story, audiences decide whether authors can, in fact, "tell their truth." In Miquela's case, the suggestion is further exploded: Miquela was an unreliable narrator, sure, but she clearly never existed to begin with.

Miquela (@lilmiquela), "PLOT TWIST: I'm back with my family." Instagram Photo, July 9, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BICG0HklauZ/>

Perhaps the whole endeavor simply reveals the performative heart of the old saying "don't let the truth get in the way of a good story." But as story, it also publicly puts both Miquela and brud in mutual control of her narrative. Both are seen, now, as legitimate storytellers (which brud needs to start directly profiting off this endeavor). Miquela's personal narrative is literally implanted in her brain by brud, and she comes to believe new realities when she is confronted with the truth by someone whose whole purpose was to reveal that truth. They authenticate themselves as storytellers and create a canon for Miquela. Audiences are suspending disbelief when engaging with Miquela as "real" (or at best, are confused as to whether she is CGI or a physical-world robotic construct). However, the audience must do more than suspend disbelief, but accept as narratively authentic multiple actively contradictory lines of reasoning. For that to be possible suggests that narrative authenticity successfully separates authenticity and realness, or reality. Miquela is authenticated as influencer, and as the absolute authority on her own story (along with brud,

of which she is a part, an employee as well as a creation). The authorial precarity between the in-fiction and out-of-fiction worlds is what lends Miquela her challenged authenticity. Where *lonelygirl15* falls apart when the fourth wall comes down, Miquela's fifth wall appears, realer than ever before.

Miquela (@lilmiquela), "!!Exclusive drip with @Highsnobiety" Instagram Photo, June 1, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BjgGKW2IBHV/>

"living my best life": the virtual authentic self

So now we're left to wonder, as *Cultured Magazine* columnist Jenna Sauers does in an April 2019 piece, what is "life after fiction"?²⁷ In the year following this odd, absurdist publicity stunt, Miquela's open virtuality propelled her to greater fame, larger brand deals, and new avenues for performance that integrates her virtual identity seamlessly into her narrative of authenticity while offering new dimensions for virtual performance and self-crafting. Miquela's success also raises uneasy questions. She returns to a kind of mimetic reproduction, but here she reflects another layer of authenticity tropes: the idea of the "authentic life."

Miquela (@lilmiquela), "Just the Election Fairy teaming up with @Tinder to remind you that Tuesday is Election Day..." Instagram Photo, November 4, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bpx_auAnvSN/

The year following her announcement sees Miquela “living her best life.” Her clothing line, Club 404, released in April 2019, as did her first album. As well, she works with coveted brands and has an increasing political involvement, working with causes such as Black Lives Matter and notably involving herself in get-out-the-vote efforts in 2018. Out-of-fiction, as well, Miquela’s images become noticeably more technically sophisticated. She appears in a wider variety of lighting conditions (an ongoing challenge for CGI image-making) and interacts more with complex objects and persons in the shots.²⁸ In these acts, Miquela articulates perhaps the most recognizable form of authenticity—the self-help-informed idea of “living one’s best life.” Grounded in Romanticists’ ideas of the authentic life (particularly Rousseau) and Existentialist notions of self-knowledge and self-actualization, this definition of authenticity is an external performance of an internal, absolute truth: who one is. As Charles Guignon argues, the contemporary self-help industry builds on this Romantic authenticity and suggests that self-fulfillment is not only possible, but is stable and achieved by becoming oneself.²⁹

In fact, this authenticity is most directly referenced across Instagram, as a standard for real influencers as well as virtual ones. One of the central paradoxes of the platform is the insistence on authenticity and “realness,” whether in the form of sublime landscapes or #nofilter selfies. These acts constantly re-perform the idea that idealized images offer access to genuine interior life; one would like to be constantly traveling, consistently beautiful, and eternally living one’s best life, and an Instagram feed can construct a maximally perfect narrative. As Sarah Banet-Weiser argued in 2012, the 21st century is filled with “the looming sense that we are not real enough, that our world is becoming more and more inauthentic, despite our endless efforts to the contrary.”³⁰ Banet-Weiser anticipates the Instagram world as it hyper-expresses this looming sense, and responds with carefully constructed assertions of an authentic life. On Instagram, authentic life is accessed through branding, and Miquela’s construction of a “personal brand” is virtually enhanced, but entirely consistent with branding practices. Banet-Weiser marks self-branding as “a new social arrangement that relies on different strategies for identity construction and hinges on more progressive ideals such as capability, empowerment, and imagination.”³¹ She suggests that the contrast between real and fake (offline and online) ideals is “ultimately beside the point” as they are shaped by the same discourses that champion freedom as they create more excellent consumers of brand culture. Miquela and other virtuosic influencers (embodied or otherwise) fully inhabit their self-brands, to the point that living their brand literally is living their best life.

For Instagram performers, managing this contradiction is both crucial to success, and extremely taxing. For instance, human model Essena O’Neil publicly jettisoned her social media presence in 2015 and devoted herself entirely to exposing how “Instagram is not real life,” and how vast the burnout of maintaining these elaborate fictions can be. Requiring women to maintain impossible standards of beauty, wealth, and fame is of course nothing new, and feminist critiques are as apt in the era of Instagram as ever. Banet-Weiser critiques advertising campaigns that emphasize “real beauty” as merely another beauty standard, which remains present in the advertising landscape of Instagram. But the crucial point Miquela demonstrates is how Instagram’s images render these impossibilities performative. Feminist performance scholar Elin Diamond reimagines the “dialectical image” as a feminist mode of response through experience, where “in a moment of mimetic apprehension, the commoditized images embodied and destroyed by these women performers suddenly illuminate the crises of the present.”³² As image, perhaps all Instagram posts possess this dialectical potential, and the crises they illuminate is one of authenticity; a crisis where audiences care less whether the image embodies a real person than that it expresses a genuinely felt sense of life.

Miquela is not subject to burnout, nor liable to slip up or abandon the unreal world of Instagram to which she is ontologically bound. On the one hand, Miquela could arguably undermine the cruelty of Instagram realness: after all, she could easily become someone else in ways that are out of reach for corporeal beings. On the other hand, she embodies the seamless self-actualization that most Instagrammers only dream of. Each of the forms of authenticity demonstrated here are contradictory; as such, a virtuosically authentic performance is perhaps only possible for virtual beings. In her refusal to

become virtual O’Neill must also reject authenticity—the maintenance of the authentic self is only possible for beings who can navigate the real and un-real without experiencing contradiction. Miquela, on the other hand, embraces authenticity, precisely because it is an impossible standard.

Miquela (@lilmiquela), “We were built for this.” Instagram Photo, July 25, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BlrReWUI419/>

Perhaps, then, us humans would be wise to leave the Instagram form of the “authentic best life” to the robots. Perhaps automation really can replace every profession under the sun. But perhaps Miquela’s ascension offers an opportunity to see these digital standards of authenticity for what they are: new avenues to engage with the promise and peril of performance. By combining the three forces of authenticity, Miquela re-stages the digital, fictional, young-girl to remind us that this is not a new paradigm, so much as a newly performative form of a very old one. In a culture of branded authenticity Miquela, along with a whole spectrum of Instagram microcelebrities, truly are built for this.

1 <https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/>

2 Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 38.

3 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 12.

4 Streetwear refers to a subculture, clothing style, and general aesthetic that draws on athletic fashions beginning in the 1990s, incorporating casual clothing popular in skate culture, hip-hop, punk, and Japanese casual fashion. The subculture is extremely visual, brand-driven, and fast-paced, and as such it has a very active presence on Instagram. As a primarily photo-sharing platform, Instagram has a highly stratified hierarchy of genres and prominent users often occupy very specific niches; indeed, popular accounts often set the visual terms of certain types of photograph across the platform. See Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017, <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>)

5 Kenny Wassus and Emilia Petrarca, "How We Made Our Own CGI Influencer in 48 Hours," *The Cut* May 15, 2018. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/05/how-we-made-our-own-cgi-influencer-in-48-hours.html>

6 See Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30:6, 377-386 (2010).

7 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 35-58.

8 The restriction of communication methods is common across online contexts, and the "available tools" define how platforms circulate social realities. See Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017).

9 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 324-326.

10 Kimberly Ann Hall, "The authenticity of social-media performance: lonelygirl15 and the amateur brand of Young-Girlhood," *Women & Performance* 25:2 (2015), 133.

11 These ascensions are also reflected in the language of her captions. Compare June 7, 2016: "Stealing Molly's #TBT but honestly shoulda stole those glasses 🍷🍷" to December 8, 2018's "Just a casual night out. Saw Meghan Markle, Queen of the United States (official title), and did a half-gasp, half-yell that was Very Fashion. 🍷 Also, I'm not returning this @richardquinn outfit, ever. Sorry! #fashionawards #bfcnewwave 🍷 Darren Gerrish"

12 See Julia Straub, "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Authenticity" and Suzanne Knaller, "The Ambiguousness of the Authentic: Authenticity between Reference, Fictionality, and Fake in Modern and Contemporary Art" in *Paradoxes of Authenticity* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 1-75.

13 Heather Snowden, "Instagram Is Full of Designer Fakes, According to New Study," *Highsnobiety*, April 30, 2019. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/instagram-designer-fakes/>. See also The Fashion Law, "Instagram Is the 'Top Showcase Platform for Counterfeiters' on the Web," April 29, 2019. <http://www.thefashionlaw.com/home/instagram-is-the-top-showcase-platform-for-counterfeiters-on-the-web>.

14 Daisy Jones, "Why We Follow Lil Miquela, the Instagram Model with 900K Followers & No Soul," *Refinery29* April 10, 2018. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/miquela-sousa-fake-instagram>.

15 Ibid.

16 <https://www.instagram.com/bermudaisbae/>

17 Emilia Petrarca, "Everything We Know About the Feud Between These Two Computer-Gen-

erated Instagram Influencers," *The Cut* April 18, 2018. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/lil-miquela-hack-instagram.html>

18 Ibid. (some posts remain available @bermudaisbae: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhsaN1kHr-x>)

19 Apple Notes essays are, themselves, a trope of celebrity apologia.

20 Brud, "A note from the team at Brud." Instagram photo, April 20, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhzSfUYnfC3/>

21 Emily Petrarca, "Everything we Know..."

22 Brud, homepage. www.brud.fyi

23 Chris Sims, "To Understand Feuds between Virtual Influencers, You Need To Understand Pro Wrestling," *The Verge* May 9, 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/9/17332778/instagram-lil-miquela-bermuda-feud-pro-wrestling>

24 Hall, "The authenticity of social-media performance," 130-131.

25 Ibid., 134.

26 Anna Iatsenko, "That Is Real: Oprah Winfrey and the James Frey Controversy," in *Paradoxes of Authenticity* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 231.

27 Jenna Sauers, "Life After Fiction: the Future of Lil Miquela," *Cultured* April 23, 2019, <https://www.culturedmag.com/lil-miquela/>

28 This is purely speculation, but it seems likely to conclude that the imagery became more sophisticated because brud received an influx of cash following the 2018 stunt, allowing them to upgrade on technology and talent. While the company is very willing to talk to reporters and authors, they never drop the fictional frame, so it is challenging to answer technical questions regarding Miquela.

29 Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (Routledge: London, 2010).

30 Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic(TM): The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

31 Ibid., 69

32 Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 180