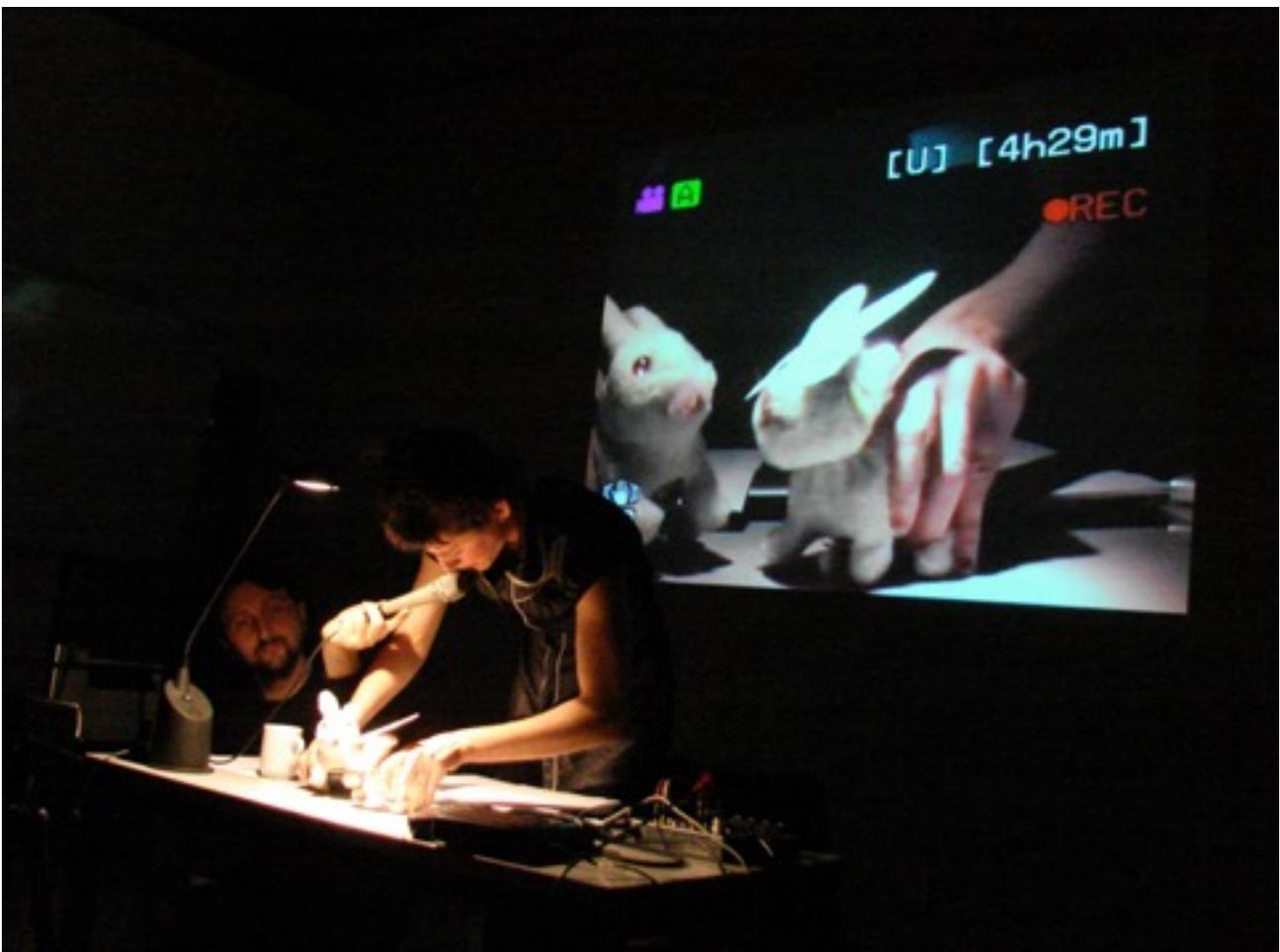


## Veridiana Zurita - Life Is Too Short

### 'Did you feel it?' - A symposium on digital interfaces and their affect. (2015)

Five years ago when I meet these puppets I invited them for a philosophical conversation. A cat who forgets he is a cat and thinks he is a rabbit and a rabbit who is numbed enough to accept and enjoy his condition as a toy designed to simulate the "real" rabbit. While the cat-toy, who is delusional by the desire to become the numbed model, struggles with how life has become subjected to a manual that had committed suicide, the rabbit-toy advises his rebel-follower to become who he really is. And who he really is, is a hell of a trouble. The attempt to overcome a certain bodily condition brings them to a journey of quotations, where not only their physicality but their discourses seem to be reproducing voices. The manual commits suicide alarming the puppets that following some imagined perfect future is a recipe for dissatisfaction and constant striving.



The suicidal manual tries to awake the puppets against the loop of impossible satisfaction when a model of life is unquestionably desired. That's exactly the loop played by Self-Help culture; making you believe that by following exercises, advises, tips and the series of step-by-step empty statements you can achieve whatever is promised towards a successful life. The strategy of comparing one's current situation to some imagined perfection of self is a recipe for addiction rather than autonomy. But in Self-Help culture the manuals never commit suicide... instead they are kept as eternal ghosts hunting whoever wants to exit their scripted lives.

And that's again the loop, as much you read, listen, watch and reproduce those codes of a successful life more you need them, yet thinking you are actually owning your own narratives.

The Self-Help culture borns in a specific moment and to track and understand its process of growth means to understand the co-dependent relation between the building up of contemporary subjectivity and the capitalistic world.

Self-Help Culture finds its time to grow with the counterculture of the 60's and 70's. It appropriates the resistance towards the manipulation used by advertisement to feed back the profiting system of a market. When a whole generation finally realised that advertisement used manipulation to make you do what you didn't want to do and, more deeply, to make you desire what you didn't desire, to make you desire what was not "inside of you", to make you desire what was inside somebody else's mind, advertising companies find in that claim a way, together with theories of psychoanalysis, to understand the consumer's feelings associated with products and mark them with human unconscious desires. From that period the claim for an original self and truthful to one's own experience started emerging and rapidly reproduced by the self-help culture. And so you would here a lot of "that's not who I am, that's who somebody else's is" or "I don't want to be somebody else's man" or "I don't want to be somebody else's tool" or "I want to be me". And to be you was an easy target to be produced and consumed.

The Self-Help culture seems to be an exemplary strategy of appropriating processes of thinking and resisting to the normative and turn them again into a brand new manual for life. The birth of Self-Help must be linked to postmodernism itself-to the way postmodern subjectivity constructs self-reflexive subjects-in-process. But the way Self-Help appropriates turns the postmodern crisis of subject-hood into something not articulated but enacted and reproduced. The literature of self-improvement directs the reader to exercises of self-written trajectories of an heroic life. It invites the reader into the power of the individual as its own and original force for conquering success. It sales to the reader the possibility of invented selves, however the narratives provided by the self-help market are actually most effective not for creation and invention but rather for the maintenance of normative notions of the self. Although it introduces familiar and common problems of life, creating the illusion that even if narrating your own experience towards victory you connect to others and to shared troubles, self-help culture is in fact solidifying what one should seek and project for a life conceived by a private individual. Alone and conquering its own dreams.

And this narrative of the self as the one who can be whoever he wants to be, running and always busy after his success and power, which is guaranteed by his step-by-step progressive life is well known within neoliberal conservative turns. Self-determination is the key for conquering whatever you want. You can do it! Make things happen! Better your best! If you can dream you can do it! Set goal! Make plan! Get to Work! Stick to it! Reach the goal! Click here to get you success! Discipline, in five minutes! Achieve your goals! Winning personality, the magic keys for success! But don't worry, because if you don't succeed, as expected by a certain logic, a certain mind, a certain body, we have a whole range of alternatives for you to treat your self and medicate your incapacities. Specially to treat and cure your incapacity to connect and fit within a healthy society. You can't fit yourself in it, we know. You feel socially isolated, right? A sense of solitude and a lack of belonging, isn't it?

Isolation and the lack of a sense of community become at the same time the lack and the promise of this “healthy” society.

When social isolation is hosted by the Twelve-Step groups (another technique of self-help culture), individuals sought a sense of community but in fact are subjected to another symptom of the psychologising of the personal. The preoccupation with the self seemed to have served as a tool for social control: calming down political unrest for one's own pursuit of self-invention. The kind of discourse around successful trajectories of life were the key for the development of the self-motivated individual, whose life is always under control by the obsession with progress and the conquering of whatever is desired. The amount of motivational speeches online grows together with the growth of neoliberal politics where a profitable and successful life is the target to be achieved, no matter what.

When self-help gets a ride into the postmodern waves of deserting the rationality of a discursive culture towards what is more associated with sensation, feeling, and affect, a contemporary subjectivity starts to be build up. A subjectivity that receives the huge amount of online information in a reactive and emotional way. The work of Self-Help towards envisioning a self instead of writing about one's self gets directly associated with pleasure and with the perceptual world of image and sensation. But Self-Help doesn't leave the discursive language behind. It brings the speech of the desired-self aligned with the images to be reactively received and reproduced. Physicality and speech are tight up by a logic of the coherent, stable, successful and progressive subject.

No matter what you need to achieve, either success in business, or winning the battle over mortality by getting rid of wrinkles, or cure for depression, or loading your blood cells with love and against panic attack, or getting rid off your fear of failure self-help can offer you a strategy for it. And usually it's supposed to work. And if doesn't, you are the problem. So, there you go. You are caught by the loop of striving for the achievement of a fiction that has become naturalised as the only possibility of reality.

To appropriate the other's advice seem to be merely a task of reproduction. A quiet, satisfied and medicated reproduction. And for this reproduction to happen smoothly without much questioning, any possible paradox between what you objectively see and how you subjectively perceive it needs to be avoided. But there is a space there, in between what you see and how you perceive it. And this space is not necessarily a border, or for sure not a border which guarantees a separation. It is a space of relationality where there is much more paradox than affirmation.

But what kind of paradox is possible between myself and those I watch advising me online for example? If you ever got looped by the amount of You-Tube videos about how to succeed in life you might have felt yourself as becoming an opaque layer, which is reactively receiving those words of victory. Opaque because you probably couldn't be a surface mashing those narratives and yours but instead getting drowned by the affirmative logic of self-help. And so you might have reproduced that statement, that gesture, that logic, that subject.

The intermediated space between you and those advising you online is lost for an immediate space, where the anxiety for direct empathy takes place. To become or to consume that model, which is virtually present

accelerates any possibility of experiencing the paradox of that desire. You simply want, you simply go for it and you simply get it. That whole path between the human body and what is behind the screen is synthesised into a fast consuming gaze. The interface seems to be transposed from the technological device into the skin itself. The very externality of the body takes over the place of the screen itself. It becomes that very surface because of the direct appropriation of what is behind. No digestion is fast enough to accompany that speeded rhythm of deglutination.

If I look at this intermediated space between myself and what I see behind the screen as an inert one, that one of social isolation masked by busy connectivity, I have to think of it as a lack of space, as a space which is lost over the illusion of proximity to those images I see. And this illusion of proximity to the narratives these images introduce leave me without autonomy from them. They somehow make me believe that I can only relate to them if by consuming and reproducing their discourses.

But if I see this intermediated space as a potential one, where among the narratives behind the screen and those behind my skin there is a whole transitional area I would call it as a transitional space. Borrowing the term from the paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, the transitional space is the area of experience that can keep the paradox between inside and outside, subject and object, self and other, personal and collective alive. While the psychoanalytical society was trying to solve the paradox between the subject and her/his outside world Winnicott was dedicated to keep that paradox present. He dedicated his whole work in order to develop practices and theories around the transitional space and by observing this transitional space in the materiality of objects used during childhood. The teddy bear or any other object considered by him as the first not-me object. The object itself was not his interest, but specifically the use of the object and how, through playing with it, the child would experience the reality of a transitional space between inside and outside himself. And the paradox present in this transitional space shouldn't be shut down, annihilated or solved. The paradox was not a disease for him, something to be resolved or cured. Quite on the contrary, it was the very experience of a paradox what activates the relational space between what is objectively seen and what is subjectively perceived.

To play with this transitional space is to play with how the body appropriate things. It creates a process of digestion of what is consumed that seems to give back to the outside something other than what was there before. In this transitional area desire is suspended. It loses the direction of wanting "that" or "that" and it gains a quality of relation with "that" or "that". When I mime voices and gestures of those self-help ghosts, without the desire to reproduce them as they seem to appear to me, but instead allowing the gap between their presence and mine, a gap in the reproduction of it takes place. In order to feel along, one needs not to be in the body of another, which is an impossible attempt, but rather to feel the positioning, the distance, the volume and the surface of it.