

# REGARDING THE NINETEEN-NINETIES BY KETTER WEISSMAN ON EMILY MULENGA'S *1997 BC*

August 11–September 8, 2020



Emily Mulenga, *1990 BC*, 2020, GIF. Courtesy of Emily Mulenga.

Image Description: A collage of digital images fills a square space. Images include a fluorescent blue nightscape of city buildings, a box of Pokémon cards, a video game controller, a snapshot of people walking through a mall, and a childhood image colored purple and repeated many times. Layered atop is a photograph of a black woman with straight, green hair held back with a Hello Kitty clip. The woman wears a mask over her mouth. Text, the final collage layer, reads “i care for myself the way i cared for my tamagotchi.”

Through video, digital collage, photography, and other media Emily Mulenga (b. Staffordshire, 1991, UK) explores the way liberty and pleasure can be found in digital spaces through internet personas, video games, and virtual realities. Since 2013, the artist has created a lexicon of avatars, personalized emojis, and more to generate digitally-fashioned selves and examine the ways in which a generation born alongside the expansion of the web explores identity on- and off-line. *1997 BC* (2020) examines the possibilities of the physical and digital in quests for selfhood, while undermining consumer-driven sensations of liberty. There are three critical components in this polyvalent GIF: the toy, the mall, and the cyberpunk. Through these elements, Mulenga threads together themes of selfhood, consumerism, and escapism.

Tamagotchis, Pokémon cards, and Hello Kitty ephemera spawned in Japan and reached near-global markets becoming touchstones of a 1990s adolescence. Overlaying moving image, photographs, film and video game stills, ballooned text that is emblematic of early pixelated fonts reads “i care for myself like i cared for my tamagotchi” [sic]. The egg-shaped device in reference hatches digital characters that require food, play, and a clean habitat. Tamagotchi and its incessant need consumed millennials. Pokémon cards—on the right side of the work—were rapidly traded and contemplated during the decade and beyond; while Hello Kitty, present on the face of the artist, holding back her hair, was and is an icon of cute consumer culture.<sup>1</sup> Each of these toys and their contained characters were early devices upon which millennials could assert, derive, and project personhood.

Humanizing the Tamagotchi and placing the gadget in the realm of care, Mulenga exposes the toy as a technological expansion of self. The escapism the device enables through the fostering of another life—albeit digital—foreshadows the possibilities of further fashioning in virtual realms. The cybernetic relationship between the Tamagotchi and the human fostered an early understanding of life within digital spheres.

With the maturation and increasing accessibility of technology, digital natives were able to more easily explore identities online, crafting distinct personas. Self-fashioning describes the depiction of individuals in the 1600s wherein the pose and position of the subject are highly dignified, indicating prowess and status. In 2015, Amanda Hunt curated *In Profile* at The Studio Museum in Harlem which showcased modern and contemporary works of art with a “specific focus on works that embody the concept of self-fashioning.” The exhibition reimagines and recontextualizes the term to “highlight instances of black individuals creating their own images in art.”<sup>2</sup> Digital-fashioning lifts from this practice of self-imagining, bringing it into the virtual where bifurcated persons can be created, posed, and altered. Mulenga often uses her body as a frame of reference from which she departs. In *1997 BC*, digitally-fashioned portraiture elements manifest in a more nostalgic manner; and the artist compresses time, using technologies of today to alter a face of the past. Two photographs, one from the present—time stamped by a mask that covers the artist’s nose and mouth—and one from the 1990s, reveal technological manipulations of selfhood. The young face is heliotrope and an

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1 In Sianne Ngai’s “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 31, No. 4, Summer 2005, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 814; the scholar delves into the aesthetic of cute and the adjective’s association with objects that possess malleability. The inclusion of Hello Kitty here merits further text and analysis.

2 *In Profile*, March 26–June 28, 2015, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

oval ring of violet and magenta frames the image. The capture is shown more than ten times as if echoing the many selves now explorable in the digital realm before exposing the expression. In *Junk*<sup>3</sup> and *4 Survival 4 Pleasure*<sup>4</sup> Mulenga embellishes and adapts features in a virtual space. With technological fabrication across Mulenga's work, the artist comes into dialogue with peers exploring the many facets of identity.<sup>5</sup>

Malls, Tamagotchis, and explorations of self are intrinsically linked. Before the web and the proliferation of multiverse gaming systems, malls were a primary place to escape the mundane and explore identity in a hyper-controlled, though perceptively liberating, environment. Mulenga introduces the shopping center into this work through three videos, all of which were lifted from web accessible footage. A scene dated January 2, 1991 reveals shoppers milling through the climate-controlled, capitalist utopia. In this year, *Terminator* was the largest film, and the World Wide Web became publicly available. While digital worlds were ever-growing, shopping centers remained fixtures of exploratory gathering spaces. These multi-markets are described by Jean Baudrillard as a "functional screen of activities. . . a giant montage factory."<sup>6</sup> The metaphoric screen became literal as time proceeded, ultimately leading to the demise of standardized and sanitized megamalls. The shopping center offered escape and an exploration of new or other selves, the Tamagotchi made this practice portable.

As quests for personhood through fashioning and projection continue to grow digitally through video games, as well as at-home, online purchasing power, the mall becomes moot. Mulenga's footage of mall interiors glitch, disrupting the consumptive activities of the shoppers, as well as the viewer's voyeurism. In her forthcoming book, Legacy Russell explores the power of the glitch—the error that leads to new non-binary possibilities.<sup>7</sup> Mulenga's decision to use bugged, imperfect mall scenes underscores an imperfect capitalist system, evolving the understanding of the glitch as being an essential tool and term for the exploration of consumerism.

The base layer of the GIF is a scene from *Akira* (1988) which takes place in hedonistic, plutocratic 2019 Neo-Tokyo where a government project has gone awry. The inclusion of the cyberpunk film, creates space for a dystopic questioning of the capitalism exhibited in the mall scenes and calls attention to futures imagined in the past. In the film, Colonel Shikishima

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3 *Junk* (2014, video, 3:50 min.) dissects and subverts the making of a "modern babe" overlaying footage of the artist's physical body with her virtual avatar and incorporating clips from a difficult conversation about the aesthetics of plastic surgery that occurred reality television show *The Hills*.

4 *4 Survival 4 Pleasure* (2017, video, 7:19 min.) is a compilation of digital-fashioning where a principal avatar or cyborg evolves over the course of seven songs ranging from *Sleep Away* by Bob Acri to *Rollin* by Cardi B and *Lookin Good* by Bratz.

5 The 2019 exhibition *Camp Fires*, curated by Kerry Doran, Violeta Mansilla, and Simon Wursten Marin centered on the knowledge that "identity is not a definitive state, but is a fluid dynamic, coming from the constant negotiation between the ontological self or selves and how one is perceived from the outside." This presentation in Buenos Aires showcased many digital-fashioning artists with whom Mulenga shares visual and virtual languages. This includes Jacolby Satterwhite's (b. 1986 in South Carolina) and Cibelle Cavalli Bastos (b. 1978 in São Paulo).

6 Jean Baudrillard translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 53.

7 Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (Brooklyn and London: Verso, 2020), 11.

demands that opposing military forces stand down and states “open up your eyes and look at the big picture, you’re all puppets of corrupt politicians and capitalists.”<sup>8</sup> The quote demands an awareness to the ways in which consumerism may seem to offer liberty, fostering the confusion between autonomy and purchasable independence. Underneath the solace discoverable in glittering malls and escapist devices are dystopic murmurs.

Mulenga uses light to bring a cyberpunk undercurrents to the foreground, further incorporating themes of escapism. Neon hues and refractions beyond the recent photograph of the artist command attention. The image from which the lights are pulled is the video game Yakuza that allows players to engage in action-adventures of the eponymous group. Playing Yakuza, as one might do using the PlayStation remote on the bottom right of the GIF, is an advanced technological escape, a highly developed Tamagotchi. By using and manipulating this image, the artist foregrounds the ways in which one can escape current circumstances, stepping into digital worlds.

*1997 BC* contains soothing footage of a fountain mall. Water jets softly upward and is colored a synthetic purple that nearly matches the hue of Mulenga’s childhood photograph. Its presence at the shopping center where toys were purchased and escapism was pursued would offer a moment of surreal, technologically powered comfort. These sentiments can now be achieved digitally in technological realities imaginable in the 1990s.

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8 *Akira*, Katsuhiro Otomo, (Tokyo: Akira Committee Production, 1988), 1:08 min.

**BIG WINDOW**