



Moments of identity: dynamics of artist, persona, and audience in electronic music

Giovanni Formilan¹ · David Stark^{2,3}

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Abstract

In our account of artistic identities among electronic music artists, we point to the notion of persona as a key element in a triadic framework for studying the dynamics of identity. Building on pragmatist theory, we further draw on Pizzorno's concept of mask and Luhmann's notion of second-order observation to highlight the dual properties of persona: whether like a mask that is put on or like a probe that is put out, persona is *a part* that stands *apart*. Persona is an object that alter can recognize and by which ego can be recognized; but what is recognized defies the person's complete control. We thus conceptualize identity as a multi-sided relationship that involves person, persona, and others. Building on our ethnographic research among electronic music artists in Berlin and New York, we characterize this relationship in terms of *attachment* between artist and persona, between artist and audience, and between persona and audience. These attachments are variable and independent from one another. The resulting model is an analytic tool to examine identity as the ongoing outcome of the three-way dynamics of such shifting attachments. We are attentive to persona because the creation and curation of online profiles have become a pervasive element in many people's daily interactions in both social and work situations.

Keywords Attachment · Electronic music · Identity · Persona · Second-order observation

✉ David Stark
D.Stark@warwick.ac.uk; dcs36@columbia.edu
Giovanni Formilan
giovanni.formilan@ed.ac.uk

¹ University of Edinburgh Business School, Edinburgh, UK

² Department of Sociology, Columbia University, Knox Hall, 606 W. 122nd Street, New York, NY 10027, USA

³ Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Introduction

On August 29, 2014, a Facebook post by Joseph Adebayo, a London-born, Berlin-based, techno music artist, announced a new alias: “Adebayo Presents Area 4.” Electronic music artists frequently have many aliases, and the notion of presenting a new persona to the public is not uncommon. Attendees at a Guggenheim Museum fundraiser in November 2013, for example, heard Richie Hawtin introducing Plastikman, one of more than a dozen aliases of the Canadian artist, into a highbrow environment. But whereas Plastikman was presented by the given name of the world-famous artist, there was something more interesting in Adebayo’s presentation of Area 4. Joseph Adebayo insists that Adebayo is one of his aliases, in effect, a chosen name for one of his personas and not just the given name of his person.

Adebayo’s presentation of an alias, as we shall see in this paper, is one example among many of how personas are implicated in moments of identity in the electronic music scene. As artists initiate a new musical project, or refine an existing one, they often also adopt a new name. Embracing a new project, they create and inhabit a new artistic persona. By observing and interviewing Adebayo and other electronic music artists in Berlin and New York, we came to understand the importance of persona in organizing artistic identity. Following those insights, we developed a theoretical proposition that it is the triadic encounter of persona with person and audience that fuels the dynamics of identity.

Building on Niklas Luhmann’s (2013) concept of second order observation and on Erving Goffman’s (1956) and Alessandro Pizzorno’s (1960/2010) notions of persona and mask, we elaborate a concept of persona that highlights a particular duality especially relevant for the study of identity. The persona is simultaneously *a part* of the person, organizing some traits of the individual, and *apart* from the person, a sort of character that defies the person’s complete control (Jerolmack & Tavory, 2014) and remains open to interventions from external others—notably, an audience.

Our theorization starts from the now classical sociological conception of identity as a product of social interaction (Mead, 1934). In our theory, however, the relevant social interactions in the dynamics of identity are not only the social relations of humans with humans but also the social interactions of humans and nonhumans (Jerolmack & Tavory, 2014). Although it might seem that sociology is the study of human beings, its proper object of study, in our view, is *being human* (Stark, 2011b: 335–336, 2020: 72). The specificity of our species is that it has co-evolved with nonhumans, many of which are the direct product of human invention and intervention (Callon, 1984, 1986; Callon & Latour, 1981; Latour, 1988). In studying the dynamics of identity, in addition to examining the social interactions between persons we must also analyze the social relations between persons and persona.

In our triadic theory of identity, we locate persona not as a simple mediator or intermediary between person and other but in a multi-sided relationship: person with persona, others with persona, and person with others. In our empirical case, these relations are characterized as artist-persona, audience-persona, and audience-artist.

Our theoretical contribution further specifies that the attachments involved in any of these relationships can vary. Sometimes the attachment of artist to persona,

for example, can be weak; at other times stronger. And the variability of weaker or stronger attachments holds also for the other two relational pairs.

Moreover, strength of attachment along any relational pair varies independently from strength of attachments along the other relations. The strength of the artist's attachment to persona, for example, varies independently from the strength of the audience's attachment to persona.

It is through processes of attachment and detachment in these multi-sided relations between person, persona, and others that identities are shaped. By carefully attending to changes in the strength of these relations, the researcher can chart the dynamics of identity. That is, alongside theoretical concepts for analyzing the triadic dynamics of identity we also contribute research tools for studying those dynamics empirically.

We build our theory from conversations and interactions with electronic music artists in Berlin and New York City. The widespread use of aliases in the field of electronic music provides an ideal setting to observe, discuss, and comprehend how relations around persona shape the dynamics of artistic identity.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we layout our triadic theory of identity. We then describe the methodology of the paper as guided by a pragmatist approach to ethnography. In the subsequent section we introduce our empirical setting, electronic music. There, we illustrate how named personas (aliases) occupy a prominent position in artistic practice. Our major findings are then presented in the section on Moments of Identity. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the creation and curation of online personas as a pervasive element in daily interactions in both social and work situations.

A part, apart: persona in the identity triad

Theoretical antecedents: from dyadic to triadic theories of identity

In the study of creative and cultural fields, researchers have paid considerable attention to the formation and validation of creators' identities and how such identities contribute to the unfolding of creativity (Amabile, 1983; Formilan et al., 2021; Jensen, 2010; Scott, 2012; Williams & Copes, 2005; Zuckerman et al., 2003). Characterizing identity as the result of one's reflexivity of choices (Giddens, 1991) or practices (Foucault, 1988), one strand of research has explored artistic identity as a process of critical self-making resulting in the expression of one's self through creative production (Amabile, 1983). Under this lens, identity is deeply connected to the notions of moral authenticity and expression of one's true inner self (Carroll, 2015).

Another strand of research on artistic identity has instead focused on the dyadic relationship involving artists and others—whether the other is conceptualized as a reference group against which the artist's fitness is assessed (Vergne & Wry, 2014) or as an audience validating a creator's legitimate categorization (Peterson, 2013) or confirming the artist's value (Cattani et al., 2014). This second stance is more sociological. With its emphasis on the relationship between artist and audience it resonates with the now classical sociological conception of identity as the product

of social interaction launched by Mead (1934), elaborated and enriched by Goffman (1956), Turner et al. (1987), and Bourdieu (1992), and continued with modifications to the present (Lahire, 2011).

Our study contributes to a third strand of theorizing about identity. What makes this alternative approach sociological is that, like its classical antecedents, it starts from the fundamental importance of social interaction. What makes this new theoretical approach stand out is that it puts together a set of three ideas about the character of such social interaction. First, in place of a dyadic conception comprising self and other, it locates identity in a triadic relationship. Second, instead of confining the social to relations among humans, it emphasizes interactions with nonhumans in the constitution/construction of identity. Third, rather than conceptualizing the role of nonhumans as mere expressions or reflections onto which identities are projected or portrayed, it emphasizes that relations with nonhumans are the ways in which identities are organized (see especially Jerolmack & Tavory, 2014: 64–67).

Brubaker's analysis of the self in the era of digital hyperconnectivity, for example, highlights the importance of nonhuman "digital objects" which are left in the online wake of the "algorithmic objectification of self" (Brubaker, 2020: 779–780). Such digital objects are not mere representations. Standing outside or alongside the self, this nonhuman digital self

is no longer simply indexical, pointing to the "real" self that it represents; it acquires a value and significance of its own as a self to be consumed by others, as part of their ongoing stream of media consumption. The digital self thus no longer simply represents the neoliberal "self of value," it becomes a self of value in its own right (Brubaker, 2020: 786).

Similarly, Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2021) provide a detailed analysis of new forms of identity in online settings. In their argument, the nonhuman third in the identity triad is the *profile* with which users interact in social media accounts. But the new triadic strand of theorizing about identity need not be confined to online settings, nor are nonhumans limited to digital objects. Such is the case in the most comprehensive theoretical statement on "nonhumans and the constitution of the social self" by Jerolmack and Tavory (2014). Drawing (although not uncritically) on actor-network theory, they analyze "everyday totemism"—practices in which humans interact with various objects, animals, and nature.

In joining this conversation for a triadic conception of identity, we build on the insights of Alessandro Pizzorno concerning the *mask* (1960/2010) and also on the notion of *second-order observation* introduced by Niklas Luhmann (2013).

Identification and recognition: Pizzorno on *persona*

In our triadic framework, the elemental third that we propose is *persona*. Originally used to refer to the face of an individual and, by analogy, to the character mask in Greek theater (Vervain & Wiles, 2001), the meaning of *persona* as theatrical mask has maintained relevance for those interested in social interaction. From its use as equipment for representation, the mask became a concept to discuss the presentation

of individual selves to others. Goffman's (1956) metaphor of everyday life as a stage owes much to the theatrical tradition, and points indirectly to the notion of persona as mask. Arriving onto the stage, individuals find preordained roles. As they perform them for an audience, they must manage the impression they—as individuals and through their masks—leave on others.

In his 1960 study, "The Mask," Alessandro Pizzorno (1960/2010) focused more explicitly on the connection between mask and persona. For Pizzorno—writing at almost the same time as Goffman—the mask is involved in a dual relationship with the person wearing it: it is an object that simultaneously conceals and reveals. On the one hand, the mask hides one's face, preventing others to gain full access to the person behind it. On the other hand, the mask shows identifiable traits, allowing the wearer to be recognized by an observer. In this simultaneous concealing and revealing,¹ the mask gives depth to the individual: one gains personality, status, and an ability to influence the environment.

For Pizzorno the mask "has a reality of its own, and thus an autonomous function" (1960/2010: 6). Different masks convey different personas with distinctive character traits. As such, different masks can be tried on to explore various features in order to find the one that provokes the audience, whether in pleasure, fear, disgust, affront, or some other desired response. Most importantly, "The mask allows its wearer to be recognized" (Sassatelli & Pizzorno, 2019: 47). Conveying character traits of a distinctive persona, the mask makes individuals recognizable and, at the same time, makes it possible for individuals to recognize themselves. Through the mask, the person can *identify with* and *be identified as* a certain persona.

Our notion of persona draws on and develops these ideas of Pizzorno. Just as he never makes a one-to-one correspondence between persona and mask, so we do not make a necessary equation of persona and alias. Just as Pizzorno's person can hide behind persona/mask, so we find our artists, at times, seeking refuge behind a persona/alias. But persona is not only for hiding. Like different masks, various and multiple artistic personas can be tried on. Which one fits? And why? Perhaps it fits because it matches expectations of what's already known. Or, perhaps differently, because it provokes the artist to try out something that will amplify the search space of the unknown.

Like Pizzorno's understanding of mask, we conceptualize persona as having an autonomous reality.² The persona exists apart from the person. But whereas for Pizzorno the reality of the mask meant that it could be *put on*, for us the autonomous reality of persona is that it is *put out* into the world. It is a third part, apart from person and from audience. Moreover, like Pizzorno's persona/mask that can reveal and conceal, our notion of persona has dual properties: a part, apart. Think of an alias. It is a name *apart*. And, precisely as a name, it is a *part* of one's artistic identity.

¹ Pointing to the mask as *protective* and *exhibitory*, Carnevali (2020: 21) writes of the freedom of hiding behind the mask and the ludic freedom of representing oneself.

² Jerolmack and Tavory's (2014) analysis of the "everyday totemism" of nonhuman objects resonates with Pizzorno's view of the autonomous reality of the mask.

Above all, with Pizzorno we emphasize processes of identification and recognition. As we shall see, in naming a persona, and in performing as that so-named figure, the artist identifies with the persona. The audience, moreover, identifies the artist as presented by the figure of the persona. In these processes of identification, artist and audience build attachments to the persona. Where we depart from Pizzorno is that we examine such identifications/attachments as variable. That is, the attachment of person (or audience) to persona is not on/off but varies in strength.

Before elaborating how identification/attachment can be seen as varying in distance, we recall Pizzorno's insight that personas help individuals recognize themselves. For us, as for Pizzorno, self-recognition is not achieved through some inwardly-gazing practice, conscious or otherwise. When we say that personas are tried on and tried out—put on, put out—we do not wish to evoke the metaphor of some already fully existing, interiorized self projected onto a screen or that persona functions as a mirror upon which the person can observe a reflected self. That is, we are not substituting a two-sided relationship of person-persona for the two-sided person-audience. Our understanding of identity begins as located in a three-sided relationship of person, persona, and audience.

Test signals: Luhmann's second order observation

Useful here is Niklas Luhmann's (1993, 2013) concept of "second-order observation." Related to early work in cybernetics by Heinz von Foerster (1984, 2003) and referring to the ideas of mathematician George Spencer-Brown (1969) and as well to the notion of *différance* in Derrida (1982, 1998), a fundamental axiom of Luhmann's systems theory is that a system cannot observe itself. And although a part (an individual, for example) can observe another part, it cannot access the observation by another. But it can observe that it is being observed. What matters for a theory of identity are actions taken in the knowledge that they are and will be observed by others.

Luhmann's concept of second-order observation is, thus, more than a theory of observation. It is also a theory of action and knowledge. The knowledge of self-recognition, not unlike knowledge in general in pragmatist theory (Dewey, 1969; Mead, 1934), is gained through action in the world. Self-recognition requires that we provoke the world. We put out something that creates a perturbation or disturbance. Identity works through probes and tests, writes Luhmann:

More typical of today are situations in which [...] we have to send test signals to discover the extent to which others are in a position to judge whom they are dealing with. [...] A person can therefore not really *know* who he is, but has to find out whether his own projections find recognition" (Luhmann, 2013: 22; emphasis in the original).

In our theory of artistic identity, persona is just such a *test signal*. As we noted, sometimes a persona, like Pizzorno's mask, can be put on to see whether it fits. That too, is already a kind of test. Luhmann's "test signal" is more of a projectile. As a

probing action, a persona is a way to assay the environment and to explore unknown pathways and possibilities (Formilan & Stark, 2020). Like a proposal, it is provisional. It can be revised, updated.³ The question is whether it is recognized. Or, in the spirit of Luhmann's question, we should ask "What is recognized?" without assuming that the characteristics recognized by the audience necessarily correspond to the characteristics recognized by the individual. Apart from the person, the meaning of persona is not entirely controlled by the person but is shaped by the identifications and attachments of person and of audience. Gaining recognition from the audience, it acquires durability. Sometimes, even rigidity.

As tests put out into the world, the persona evokes feedback; and feedback prompts alteration. The loop of posting (re-presenting), observing recognition or non-recognition, and then revising is ongoing. It follows that persona is *permanently beta* (Neff & Stark, 2004). But sometimes persona can be sticky. Popularity is a goal—and a burden. Whether because they have received no recognition or too little, persona can be deleted. Or, if not erased entirely, they can, at least, be shelved.

Person, persona, and audience

Thus, following Pizzorno and Luhmann, identity is not about individuals sincerely embracing existing roles or authentically expressing their most intimate self. Instead of the problem of matching inward and outward states—with sincerity aligning inner self to external role and authenticity aligning external actions to the true self⁴—we theorize a three-sided relationship as shown in Fig. 1. At the apex is persona, put on or put out by the person attentive to recognition by the audience. Persona gains durability in such recognitions, but the attachments of audience and person to persona need not be brought into alignment.

In observing that personas are "projected," we do not mean to suggest some notion whereby images of self are projected onto persona. Instead, as mentioned when discussing Luhmann's "test signals," personas are projectiles. Put out into the world, the persona can act back on the person. In its interaction with person and audience, in acts of recognition and self-recognition, persona becomes more objectified, i.e., an autonomous object, inviting attachments.

The variability and independence of attachments give rise to movements of persona in the space and time existing between artist and audience. Defying complete control from both the artist and the audience, the artistic persona is therefore differently configured in *moments of identity*, discrete states of relationships among the artist, the artistic persona, and the audience. These moments, instead of being

³ The idea that persona is put out in the world and remains open to alterations resonates with Tavory's (2009) analysis of the structure of flirtation, where "interactants purposefully suspend the actualization of one specific future, keeping different potential unfoldings open" (2009: 71).

⁴ On sincerity and authenticity, see especially Trilling (1972/2009). For recent work on authenticity see Carrol (2015), Peterson (2013), Jones, Anand and Alvarez (2005), and Caza, Moss and Vough (2018). Emphasizing that the notion of authenticity is historically and culturally bounded, Carnevali (2020) and Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2021) caution about overextending the concept.

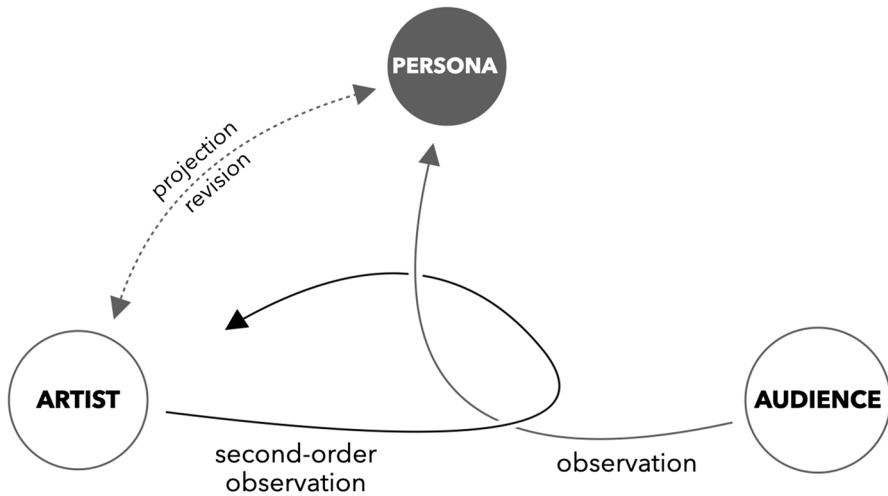


Fig. 1 Persona and second-order observation: relationship between person, persona, and audience

static or enduring, represent critical moments (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999; Hutter & Stark, 2015) when diverse configurations of person-persona-audience provoke the development of artistic identity. It is to these dynamics that we now turn.

Shifting attachments: identity in the dynamics

Attachment

Having introduced the concept of persona and argued that the social relations that produce identity adopt a three-sided form, we now characterize the lines of force, so to speak, along the axis of those relations. Anticipating our argument in very simple terms: a triangular form can take diverse shapes, depending on the distance between the points. We characterize the bonds of person-persona, persona-audience, and audience-person with reference to the concept of attachment (which we elaborate immediately below). The strength of each such attachment is variable, and the pair-wise relations of attachment can vary independently of each other. Identity results from the dynamics of these shifting attachments.

By *attachment* we refer to a form of passionate connection, a meaningful relationship that has an emotional charge (see especially Callon, 2017; Gomart & Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2017; Latour, 1999). When considering attachments, we are especially interested in the locus and character of action. The form of action involved in *being attached* (or *having an attachment*) is not at all like the act of affixing a digital object to the next email you send. Although the latter might occur accidentally, it is typically a deliberate action. In matters of attachment, by contrast, the more deliberately one has attached oneself to another, the less likely we are to refer to the two parties as being strongly attached. Whether

attachment among lovers, being attached to nicotine, or feeling strongly attached to a piece of music, as Latour posed attachment, “I do not control it any more than it controls me” (1999: 27). Similarly, Gomart and Hennion write that

to talk about these [attachments] we need stop asking, temporarily at least, about the sources of action. Questions such as ‘who acts?’ no longer work. (Gomart & Hennion, 1999: 221).

Attachment thus holds the same dual property that characterizes the nature of persona itself. As Hennion (2017) put it, attachment is simultaneously “what links us, constrains us, hold us”—a force *apart* from us—and “what we love, what binds us, that of which we are *a part*” (Hennion, 2007: 109, emphasis added).

As within Luhmann’s framework—in which the source of action and knowledge is located not in the observing/observed parties but in the system of second-order observation—so we relocate action not in the attached parties but in the relation of attachment itself. In other words, rather than resulting from the deliberate action of the attached parties, it is attachment that ongoingly enables, shapes, and re-shapes action—and, thus, makes it possible for the system to activate identity.

For these reasons, it is important to emphasize that the notion of attachment should not be misunderstood through the lens of authenticity. Attachment is not, for example, some simple function of the “truth” or “falsity” of the persona. An artist can be strongly attached to a persona that, at the same time, she experiences as profoundly other. Such an attachment is not inauthentic. Neither is it authentic. Attachment is not about authenticity.⁵

Variability and independence

We analyze changes in attachments along two dimensions: (1) the level (strength or weakness) of a given attachment is not fixed but variable; and (2) these attachments vary independently.

First, from our interviews we learned that, in some moments, artists can be relatively closely attached to their persona, while in other moments this relationship is more distant. Moreover, this holds not only for the artist but for the audience as well. That is, from the artist’s perspective, the degree to which the audience is attentive and attached to persona can vary greatly. For example, in some circumstances the audience might be almost entirely inattentive to the artist’s persona. In other moments, from the artist’s perspective, the audience can be inattentive to the person of the artist because they are so strongly attached to the artist’s persona.

⁵ In a sweeping exploration of self in the era of digital hyperconnectivity, Brubaker writes: “In a context in which *the cultural obligation to produce the self as a distinctive, authentic individual* is difficult to fulfill, the burdensome work of individualizing the self is turned over increasingly to algorithms...” (Brubaker, 2020: 788, emphasis added). While agreeing about the role of algorithms, our findings about identity work among electronic music artists suggest that *the production of an authentic self may no longer be experienced as an obligation*.

Secondly, in addition to being variable, the different relations of attachment are *independent*. At any given moment, the strength of attachment between artist and persona can be different, for example, from the attachment between audience and persona. That is, persona can be closely attached both to artist and to audience; distant in attachment to both; closely attached to artist but distant in attachment to audience; or closely attached to audience but distant in attachment to the artist.

The variability and independence of attachments do not produce a simple pattern in which persona oscillates between person and audience. Instead, each of the three elements is in motion. The combinations of these forces of attraction among the three elements yield analytically distinct states—relatively discrete configurations of person-persona-audience relations—that we elaborate below as “Moments of Identity.” These states or moments are of varying temporality, and our field research shows evidence that artistic careers involve movements among these states.

It is crucial to note that such movements are not along a trajectory. They do not follow a fixed sequence or a prescribed path. Framed in second-order observation, moreover, identity is never known once and for all, but moves between moments that are only apparently stable. In the change from one moment to another, the individual does not change identity.

Thus, identity emerges as a relational concept that highlights dynamic processes. In our perspective, 1) artistic identity is not the property or possession of an individual but is a relational concept involving artist, artistic persona, and audience; 2) the movement among the distinctive moments of identity are not changes of identity; instead, 3) identity is in the movement among such moments. Identity exists in tension.

Methods

Between October 2016 and November 2019, we had in-depth conversations with 36 electronic music artists in Berlin and New York. With 22 of them we recorded open-ended interviews that lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Three of these artists also agreed to participate in a follow-up interview about one year after our first meeting. Our informants covered the full spectrum of stages of artistic career, ranging from entry-level artists to established professionals with worldwide reputations at the time we spoke with them. We also made an extended interview with the manager of one of the most iconic electronic music record stores in Berlin. In addition to these interviews, we also had informal conversations (not recorded verbatim) with 14 other electronic music artists.

The interviews and informal conversations were complemented with observational research in which we frequented electronic music venues in Berlin and New York (both underground and popular clubs), attended several contemporary festivals on techno, house, and experimental electronic music, and participated in a rehearsal

session in Berlin. We also informed our understanding of the electronic music scene through a wide variety of secondary data, including economic and sociological investigations of the field (Formilan, 2021; Formilan & Boari, 2021; Hennion, 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 1998; Lange & Buerkner, 2012; Reynolds, 1998), studies on the politics of dance and club culture (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 1997; Thornton, 1996), accounts of the technological means of music production (Nelson, 2015; Pinch & Trocco, 2009; Prior, 2009), and secondary interviews, documentaries, and experts' commentaries published in various specialized outlets (among others, Resident Advisor, DJ TechTool, DJMag, MixMag, xlr8r, Pitchfork, Discogs, Rolling Stone, Boiler Room, Telekom Electronic Beats, Cultures of Resistance Films). These sources helped us situate the use of aliases in electronic music culture.

We approached our transcribed interviews, ethnographic field notes, and other data by adopting the pragmatist method of *abduction* (Peirce, 1934; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) that cultivates “anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012: 169).

We had launched our ethnographic fieldwork starting from the artist-audience dyadic perspective. In particular, informed by notions of authenticity (Carroll, 2015; Trilling, 2009) and sincerity (Goffman, 1956), we were initially interested in how claims of being “true to oneself” could coexist with the electronic music artists' practice of adopting multiple aliases to record, release, and perform their music. As our fieldwork progressed, our observations of and conversations with the artists prompted us to regard the alias not merely as a deceptive marketing practice (like the one that allowed lowbrow jazz to be admitted in highbrow circles; see Phillips & Kim, 2009) or as a form of insincere, inauthentic presentation of self. The framework of authenticity, we concluded, was not the way to analyze and understand the processes we were observing.

In studying our field notes and transcribed interviews, we became aware that time and again our informants were using the notion of alias to talk about their artistic identities. Recursively returning to our empirical material and prior theories of artistic identity, we came to reject the artist-audience dyadic framework and recognized that the concept of persona (Pizzorno 1960/2010) represented a newly third element in a triadic framework tradition.

We thereby reorganized the interview material and secondary data focusing on the multi-sided relations among artist, persona, and audience. The categories resulting from this process (*Incipient, Discovering, Anonymous, Inhabiting, Engaged, Pretending, Failed, Resigned, Cynical*) informed the structure of the Moments of Identity table, a three-by-three matrix where each cell represents a special configuration of the artist-alias-audience triad (or, in broader terms, person-persona-others). More detail about the empirical material that forms the basis of the Moments of Identity table is provided in the relevant section below.

Alias and persona in electronic music

Historical antecedents: given names and chosen names

Pseudonyms and aliases figure prominently in many fields, especially those high in cultural and symbolic capital, literature being one of the most prominent. Like her French counterpart George Sand, English novelist Mary Anne Evans used the pen name George Eliot to circumvent nineteenth Century stereotypes about women's writing. But her alias was also a means to differentiate her fiction writing from her already well-known work under her given name as a critic and editor.⁶ Different aliases thereby allow writers to segment different writing styles and genres, as when Agatha Christie signed her romantic novels with the name of Mary Westmacott so as not to contaminate the recognition she achieved through her famous crime novels.

For some authors, the pseudonym is always held at a distance. For others, the alias provides a persona, an alter ego, that becomes a means to gain confidence, dodge inhibitions, or channel particular creative energies (Wray, 2014). Born into the British imperial establishment, Eric Arthur Blair published under a pseudonym to avoid embarrassment to his family. But the political and literary rebel and his nom de plume became so closely attached that the person who wrote *Homage to Catalonia*, *Animal Farm*, and *1984* was known as George Orwell to all but his family and intimate friends. Sometimes, person and persona become almost indistinguishable.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the chosen name replacing the given name is that of the popes of the Catholic Church. Starting with Papa Giovanni II in 533, popes have chosen a different name as their “regal name,” a moment symbolizing the change of role and offering the new pope an opportunity to signal intentions about his papacy by linking to a particular saint and/or to previous occupants of the post. But the chosen name does not entirely eliminate the given name. Depending on context, the Polish pope, John Paul II, might be “Wojtyła,” or Benedict XVI might be “Ratzinger,” especially when referring to the pope's temporal powers or when humanizing the person behind the persona and the pageantry. Both factors are likely at play—because overlapping—in frequent mentioning of “Bergoglio” for Pope Francis. Not only the subject but also the audience shapes the timing and patterns of changes in the foregrounding of person versus persona.

In jazz music, recording companies founded in the Victorian Era deceptively published profitable but lowbrow records under highbrow-sounding pseudonyms (Phillips & Kim, 2009). In contemporary art practice, pseudonyms are often deliberately used to challenge the imperative of authorial authenticity (Milohnić, 2017), to problematize the branding and reception of artistic production (Hofer, 2006), or as part of the brand (e.g., Banksy). Ozzy Osbourne, Freddie Mercury, Elton John, and Sting are all world-famous artists, yet their names are pseudonyms. But not all actors or

⁶ In some epochs, writing under a pen name was far from exceptional. In the closing decades of the eighteenth Century, for example, almost 70% of all British novels were published pseudonymously or anonymously (Aleksiejuk, 2016: 445).

musicians have stage names. For every Marilyn Monroe there is a Robert De Niro or a Sybill Shepherd; for every Bob Dylan, a Joan Baez or an Elvis Presley.

Born in the street culture of poor neighborhoods, the aliases of rap artists are ubiquitous restatements of an ongoing rootedness in that community (Koza, 1999). Drawing from the lexicon of criminality, the “also known as” (a.k.a.) rap aliases are adopted in a setting where gang members adopt gang names, i.e., not the name of a gang but one’s name in a gang, a *nom de guerre*. And, like Stalin who derived his *nom de guerre* from the Russian word *stali* (steel) to communicate vigor and warlike temperament (Himmer, 1986), the aliases of rap artists are a means to create personas that are larger-than-life characters. Whereas Antonio Benedetto recorded as Tony Bennett to convey that his persona as jazz singer was more salient than his Italian ethnicity, the rapper Colson Baker adopts the alias Machine Gun Kelly to stress a connection to the culture of the street.

Name-altering practices and persona in electronic music

Aliases are ubiquitous in electronic music. But as our examples of the uses of alias in other cultural fields indicate, we make no claim that the electronic music practices of pseudonymity and anonymity are unprecedented. The extraordinary polyonymy (many names) in electronic music does stand out: none of the artists with whom we spoke had fewer than two aliases, many had six or more, and some electronic music artists have more than a dozen aliases. But even along this dimension, our artists’ usage is not without precedent: Marie-Henri Beyle, better known by the pen name Stendhal, used more than a hundred pseudonyms. And some of the many pseudonyms of Fernando Pessoa (for which he invented the term heteronym; see Mahr, 1998) even wrote reviews and short biographies of his other literary personas.

Participating in a subcultural field (Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996), electronic music artists found in the alias a way to preserve their legal identity during illegal occupations of warehouses and abandoned buildings, and at the same time to oppose the mass-oriented music market that wants the artist to be constantly under the spotlight (Garcia, 2015; Hofer, 2006). But the alias served more than a practical function. Moving between pseudonymity, anonymity, and polyonymy (Formilan & Stark, 2020), electronic music artists use aliases to name their projects and inhabit their artistic persona when producing and performing their music.

Our interest in alias in electronic music is not to contribute to the study of pseudonyms in general (scholarship in this field has produced a classification system of types of pseudonyms comprising some 132 subcategories)⁷ nor to analyze the field of electronic music (but see Formilan & Stark, 2020). Instead, we see the ubiquity of aliases in electronic music as an entry point to study how persona figures in the multi-sided relations that shape the dynamics of artistic identity.

⁷ To give a flavor of the technical vocabulary in this field, the categorization includes: asteronym, alio-cryptonym, animalonym, appellativonym, enigmonym, hagianym, negonym, opunym, and polyglonym. For these and many others, see Świerczyńska (1983: 47), cited in Aleksiejuk (2016: 439).

The techno music artists we spoke with see the use of an alias as creating a character. A “larger-than-life name” is one means to deal with the challenge, the “responsibility,” of getting in front of a crowd of people and leading them to an experience. We asked Joseph Adebayo about his take on aliases:

It’s an alter ego. It’s dealing with the myth of being a DJ. To be a DJ means being larger than life. You need a larger-than-life name for a larger-than-life character. Being a DJ has responsibilities of leadership to bring people to an experience. To lead them to enjoy the dancing. The DJ needs a strong character to do that. (Joseph)

Joseph went on to talk about the historical roots of techno, the associations of electronic music with raves, gay culture, drug use, and so on (Reynolds, 1998). An alias provided anonymity for the DJ who had a 4–6am set on Sunday and then went to work as a bank teller on Monday. For the DJ who was a day-time janitor, on the other side, an alias provided a way to create a character that could escape a menial job:

In those times anonymity mattered. Most people had regular jobs. Either established or not. If you’re working in an office or you’re a person with otherwise ordinary straight lives, then the aliases would give some possibility for anonymity. Or maybe you had some more menial job. If so, you could have a different name. In that case, self-esteem has something to do with using an alias. Plus a lot of artists are shy. (Joseph)

Many artists spoke of the difference between their given name and their alias or aliases. Talking about StoneAgeKid, one of his aliases, Sebastian Maschat expressed so well the relationship of artist to alias:

I think every artist has the right to think of an alias, how you want to perform. When I play with StoneAgeKid, I don’t feel like Sebastian Maschat, like the guy who goes shopping. I am StoneAgeKid when I perform. Maybe it’s better for the ego, for performing. It’s storytelling. So maybe you don’t want to tell the story of the guy who carries your given name, but you want to tell the story of the person you think of. (Sebastian)

Sebastian Maschat goes shopping. But his music tells the story of the person he thinks of, his alias StoneAgeKid. Similarly for another Berlin artist, Antonio Flores, an alias gives him the freedom to be “every time someone else, when I want to”. Indeed, freedom of expression is not gained only in the first departure from one’s given name, but in the subsequent use of different aliases over time.

New York-based multi-alias producer, Robert Garcia thinks about his different aliases as different personalities, and “putting them on” helps prepare for performance:

I think it is like different modes or feelings. This is why I think at them as personalities and celebrate them in a certain way. DJ Phobia is because I hate to be anxious and to be depressed, but I think its music is really moody and aggressive, and this is part of myself that exists but I kind of repress

because I feel it's not good. I think that putting on those shoes helps me accept those facets more, and get in the mood a little bit more, be ok with that set that I'm trying not to feel like. (Robert)

The adoption of multiple aliases also reflects an aspirational and imagined state where music needs to come before the artist's person. Robert continues:

They are ideas of myself. I don't think that people are one facet, I think people are really complex. I feel that having different means of expression is helpful to be more honest... First, it was like facelessness, it was just the sound. I like to use different names for different things, because this is about the music, whatever aesthetic choice you make with that project, without being connected to me. People can take away something from the music, without all this background. (Robert)

Like many of the utterances by these artists, Robert's statement above seems to move in two opposing directions. With an alias he can be making an aesthetic choice without it being connected to him; yet his most basic answer is that his aliases are ideas of himself.

Not the same as the self, the alias is, nonetheless, an idea of oneself. For these artists we see, therefore, that the alias is not just a name by which one is also known as but is an action that names a character representing a musical idea. The alias names a persona that is not the same as one's person. We can hear this distinction between person and persona made explicit as Matteo Pavesi, another young Berlin artist, talks about his alias, Pavlov:

Matteo Pavesi is the name of my person, Pavlov is not Matteo Pavesi. It is not all, you know... I think Matteo Pavesi is much richer than that. He has double the characteristics that Pavlov has. It is also much more confused, much more messy, it is crazy like everyone is crazy. But Pavlov is a simplification of that, because Matteo Pavesi is too complex. It's a fact that if you are too complicated and too messy, it's not gonna work as a persona. Just not gonna work. Even your girlfriend sometimes is not ready for your messiness. Don't even think about your audience having to do that. (Matteo)

Whereas Joseph Adebayo described his alias/persona as a larger-than-life character, Matteo Pavesi sees his person, in a sense, as too large with life. His alias, Pavlov is a simplification. These differing characterizations, however, share a common feature—for each is an attempt to deal with the “messiness” of life.

Matteo goes on to describe a process that nearly every one of our artists mentioned in one way or another. Having adopted an alias to name a persona that stands outside oneself to be observed as apart from oneself, the persona comes back (or “acts back”, Jerolmack & Tavory, 2014) and becomes a part of self. As with many complex ideas, words can fail. In Matteo's case, the eloquent expression was more gestural than verbal:

Pavlov has become part of the full kind of picture. You know what I mean. That was the process, and now this is the process [*note: with his hands, he*

imitates the action of taking something out of himself, and then putting it back again]. So, basically I gave life to Pavlov, and now I want Pavlov to be part of, uh, oh you know what I mean, it's kind of messed up, uh, that is how I feel. And so, when I am making Matteo Pavesi work as a producer, somehow Pavlov is part of it and Pavlov has informed my life back. (Matteo)

Our artists' personas are, thus, apart from *and* a part of their selves. Referring to one of his aliases, Sebastian can state that "When I play with StoneAgeKid, I don't feel like Sebastian Maschat... I am StoneAgeKid." It might seem that Matteo feels differently. But saying that "Pavlov is not Matteo Pavesi" is not the same as saying "I am not Pavlov." In fact, the identity of "I" is not entirely coterminous with the given name of one's person: "...when I am making Matteo Pavesi work... somehow Pavlov is a part of it."

At first view, the possibility to adopt an alias, even multiple aliases, seems to offer the electronic music artist an opportunity for enormous freedom of expression. Recall Antonio's early excitement about the possibilities, "I can be every time someone else when I want to." But the artist-alias relationship becomes more complex when we begin to consider audience expectations. For Robert, the situation is clear: the artist might control the music, but the audience controls the story. "The story is dictated by other people, by what they say about the artist. The control is in people. You have control when you release, but then it's about the audience."

To communicate his experience, Antonio Flores adopts the superhero metaphor,

When I was starting all these things, I chose by myself this kind of Marvel character. I wanted to be like Spider-Man. But now I realize that society made Spider-Man out of Peter Parker. Because you can't do these things as a normal person without scaring the neighbors, or the police, or politics, or whatever. The society is the one that says, "Ok? You want to be Peter Parker with all these freak ideas and jumping around? Fuck off, we kill you because we are afraid of you"—this is what I realized. (Antonio)

Antonio's account is fascinating in many aspects. Like Joseph and other artists, he thinks of his alias as a larger-than-life character, in this case like a comic book superhero. But, if adopting a persona and its attendant alias allows him to do things in character that he might not otherwise initially have been able to do, society (i.e., the audience) will not let him do these same things *out of character*. Like Spider-Man, the techno artist can think and do marvelous things. But doing so as "Peter Parker" (i.e., without the benefit of the persona) is unacceptable to the audience, Antonio says he now understands.

Thus, we see that the audience's recognition of the artist's persona is double-edged. On one side it is much-sought recognition. The audience's connection of persona to style establishes a brand; but it can also be confining:

Here's how it is. You're recognized for a thing. A particular brand. It's kind of sad in a way. Because you can be kind of trapped in your style, even a kind of prison. (Joseph)

How to escape the trap of audience expectations? Choose a new alias, say many of the artists we spoke with. Reka was clear about her take on multiple aliases: "I think people use different identities or pseudonyms, in order to avoid expectations on them." In a music field, audience's expectations can develop in respect to music style—which, as Joseph expressed, can become a prison: "With a new alias you can get freedom of expression to get out of the style prison." But, in the very next breath, Joseph expresses the techno artist's dilemma,

The alias is the larger-than-life alter ego. It is the means for freedom of expression, and it is the style prison. It is the escape from one prison. But in that a step to be lost again in another prison. (Joseph)

Or, in the words of Antonio Flores about his appropriately named alias, Bad Copy:

Right now I've four or five different labels and I die every time. Every day when I go to the studio and I have in mind I have to finish something for Bad Copy, I have to die and wake up as Bad Copy. And it's very stressful for me because I just want to do my thing. (Antonio)

What emerges from the interview material is that persona has a reality of its own. Even when it is strongly attached to the artist, it stands as a third party in relation to artist and to audience. Like the artist and the audience, the artistic persona can have its own stylistic preferences, appearance, technologies, music scenes, moods, and artistic references. Not only a part of the artist, but apart from both artist and audiences, it stands as a relational peer.

Moments of identity

We have seen that the artist's relationship with their persona is not fixed and stable but variable. In some moments the artist is closely attached to (see Hennion, 2017) and strongly identifying with the persona; but at other moments there can be considerable distance between person and persona. The audience (or audiences), meanwhile, can ignore the artist's persona, be attentive to it, or perhaps even insist on it to the extreme of excluding every other aspect of the artist. The intersection of these varying postures, in our view, yields distinctive moments of identity.

More precisely, we think of three states in an artist's relationship to the artistic persona (Fig. 2, left): the artist is (1) apart from persona, (2) attached to persona, and (3) detached from persona. As our terminology suggests (and as will become clearer in the following discussion), this is not a linear dimension running from least to most attached. If thought of as indicating distance from the persona, it is a

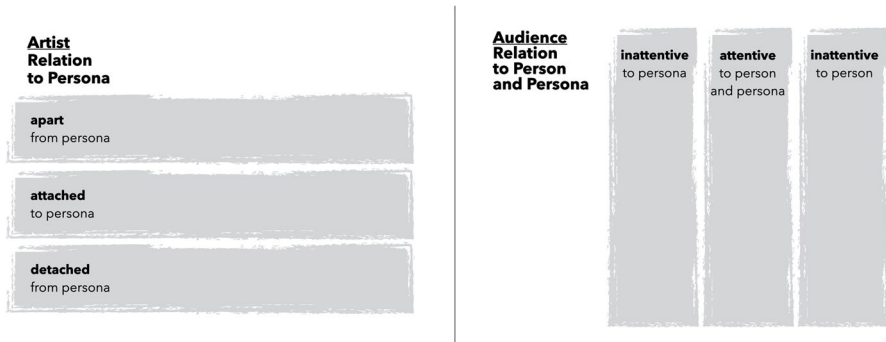


Fig. 2 Relational states between artist and persona (left) and audience, artist, and persona (right)

curvilinear inverted U—with the notion of *detachment* differing from *apart* by indicating a separation where formerly there had been an attachment.

Similarly, we think of three states in an audience’s relationship to artist and persona (Fig. 2, right): the audience is (1) inattentive to persona, (2) attentive both to person and persona, (3) inattentive to person. Again, the variable is categorical rather than linear. The variable can be considered as indicating changes in an audience. Equally it can reflect different audiences. Although misleading if understood too narrowly, one way to consider this variable would be to think about the different types of audiences in different spaces, for example, in a room, in a club, or in a stadium. Different types of audience do not, of course, map isomorphically to different types of venues: some of these friends and family from a room might be present among the loyal fans in a club, and some of these loyal followers might be among the mass audience in a stadium or a very large festival. What matters for our analysis are differences in how the audience recognizes or ignores aspects of the artist. (Because our data primarily come from our interviews with artists, strictly speaking, here we are charting changes in the *artist’s perception* of audience.)


Table 1 presents the distinctive moments of identity that we chart at the intersections of our categorical variables of artist (row-wise) and audience (column-wise).⁸ While at the time of the interviews each artist was occupying a single cell, their biographical accounts revealed various movement across the table space. For instance, in 2016 Antonio was clearly in a critical phase between *Cynical* and *Resigned*, but his story was one that variously included the moments *Incipient*, *Inhabiting*, *Engaged*, *Resigned*, before turning to *Pretending*, *Cynical* and, eventually, *Resigned*. In fact, at the beginning of his career Antonio adopted and dismissed more than six different aliases before setting down on two names. In a follow-up interview,

⁸ At first sight, the labels assigned to the cells in the Moments of Identity table might seem specific to our empirical setting, thereby limiting their generalizability. While such labels might indeed be adjusted to reflect the idiosyncrasies of different environments, the person-persona-others configuration of each cell retains applicability beyond the context of electronic music. In fact, what qualifies the Moments of Identity table as an analytical tool to study identity work are the variable and independent attachments that exist among person, persona, and others. Consequently, the intersections outlined in the table can be used to explore identity as the ongoing outcome of triadic relationships across contexts.

Table 1 Moments of identity

		AUDIENCE		
		inattentive to persona	attentive to person and persona	inattentive to person
ARTIST	apart from persona	Incipient	Discovering	Anonymous
	attached to persona	Inhabiting	Engaged	Pretending
	detached from persona	Failed	Resigned	Cynical

however, his situation was very different: after having received strong recognition for both his current aliases, in 2018 he was in a state of engagement with both his personas and his audiences. Similar narratives were common to all artists, so that, in the end, each moment in the table was discussed by about 7–10 informants, whether as a past, present, or future state.

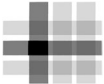
 The upper left-hand cell in Table 1, labeled *Incipient*, marks the moment when the artist has launched a new alias that is not recognized by the audience. As noted earlier, many of the artists we interviewed spoke about their aliases as a part of themselves but also something apart from them. In this moment, apartness dominates. The alias is aspirational:

I think the very first moment of art creation happens when you choose your name. Because making music, making art, is really taking something from this full ensemble and turn it into a work of art, an art piece. (Matteo)

The shy or introverted person creates a character, perhaps even deliberately caricatured, in hopes of behaving more boldly. Perhaps, like Eric Arthur Blair (aka George Orwell), they choose an alias to mark a separation from the world of family. As Tobias described, “The given name reminded him of childhood. He didn’t choose the name on his own, he was given the name and he didn’t identify with the name, so he wanted to come up with his own name. Choosing an independent life, not be a kid anymore.”

But, of course, the audience need not be attentive to the proffered persona. Think of family and friends who, in the earliest stages of a musical career, comprise a good part of the audience in the rooms or small clubs where the budding artist is performing. DJ SuperCOOL is on the program, but to this audience it is the *person*—“That’s our Stephanie!” or “Yeah, that’s Steven”—that is most salient.


Family and friends might be inattentive to persona because they are only attentive to person. But note that an audience can be inattentive to persona without being particularly attentive to the person (hence the reason for the label on this column in Table 1). This matters analytically because the *Incipient* moment need not occur only in the novice or amateur stage of a career. Some artists’ identities are punctuated by return visits to a moment when their newly adopted alias is not (yet) recognized by an audience and therefore can work as a test to try out new styles, new venues, new audiences (Formilan & Stark, 2020).

 Artists can, of course, become strongly attached to their persona, as we see moving down to the *Inhabiting* moment in the second row in Table 1. Matteo Pavesi refers to his alias, Pavlov, in the third person, but there is no doubt that he is strongly attached to this persona:

If I produce as Pavlov, it means that I am being much more creatively involved. Because Pavlov is just about the music and expressing whatever Pavlov wants to express ... Pavlov is my true musical me. If I have to be musically, I’m Pavlov. Matteo Pavesi has many dimensions, and the music dimension I named Pavlov – the other dimensions do not need to have a name. It’s quite clear in my mind. (Matteo)

Some artists claim that the urgency of expression (“What I’m doing is completely me.”) creates such a strong attachment that the audience can “take it or leave it.”

If they like it, I can just give something away, and then take it or leave it. But it’s me, that is absolutely me, and I don’t follow a trend or something else. To me it’s like, it comes out from a need. (Roger)

 Indeed, there are some artists with an emotional makeup that allows them to persist with an adopted persona in the *Inhabiting* moment despite no recognition by an audience. But for many that moment gives way to another, *Failed*.

My first record came out on NGF under the name Harmanli. The problem was no one could memorize the name properly, and I had it misspelled on every music review. I gave up with that very soon. (Alex)



It can also happen that the audience recognizes something in the artist's presentation even before awareness by the artist herself. This *Discovering* moment is not unlike an important moment in the history of the Moog synthesizer (Pinch & Trocco, 2009): the technical wizards who developed the technology knew they had invented something novel; but it was only by giving the synthesizers to musicians that capacities of the new technology were actually recognized.

When I started as a DJ in Bremen I used my name because I didn't have an alias. Then I played regularly, and in Bremen the scene is very small so they remember your name. And once I'd been playing more and more and regularly, I thought "Ok, now people know my name, why should I change it now?" They got to know me and expect something. (Reka)

Reka's observation is one of many instances in which we see that the artist's self conception is shaped not only by internal processes but also by interaction with the audience.

As we move through Table 1, it must be emphasized that moments of identity are not simply developmental stages in a career. Of course, there is movement from one moment to another, but it is not as trajectory. As an analytic device, the table depicts neither ladder nor road. Pathways, patterns of steps, are less because of already well-worn paths than the result of analytic tracings. For example, an artist who was recognized by an audience and now accepts and embraces a certain persona would move from the *Discovering* to the *Engaged* moment while another might come to this moment of identity when experiencing the acceptance of an audience after already being attached to that persona.



When audience and artist really click, they are *Engaged*. On both sides a proposal has been accepted. Attachments are strong. The artist, comfortably in character, is strongly attached to persona; and the audience embraces the artist as person and persona. Experientially, artist and audience are mutually attentive. In that moment. Tuned in.

People sometimes say that this is a Roger 23 type of record, and I'm going to play it. It's my style. (Roger)

In Roger's case, audience and artist are contemporaneous. Joseph's comment below suggests that the lines between moments (in this case between *Inhabiting* and *Engaged*) should not be too strongly drawn. His audience is in an imagined future (Mead, 1934) but for him in this moment it is the audience of reference.

I was going through a period when I was hibernating. I was struggling with the whole social media thing and the different aliases and the pressure for information and not for the music. I came out of that. Now it's time to represent myself and Africa. I'm thinking 10 years into the future. When dance music meets Africa, people will say 'Yeah, there was Adebayo, putting a flag down.' (Joseph)

As ideal type, in the second column of Table 1 audience is attentive both to persona and to person. In this moment, they will be less likely to force the performer into a single style prison. Here, Reka recalls a situation in which she was in the audience expecting to hear a particular sound:

A couple of weeks ago, I was in a situation in which I expected to hear one sound from an artist and found another one. At first I was pissed, and then I wasn't pissed anymore, and say, "No, it's ok... It's cool because he just does what he loves, he doesn't have to exactly play what he is producing." (Reka)



We turn now to the moment of identity that we label *Resigned* which, like *Pretending*, is only one "move" away from *Engaged* as well as from *Cynical*. As we see in Table 1, this moment is one of several in which the artist has become detached from the artistic persona (not only questioning the use of an alias, but also initiating the "production of self-questioning identity work", see Beech et al., 2016). Robert, for example, is deeply ambivalent about one of his aliases and thinks about giving it up:

DJ Phobia is one that I thought about letting go. I think it's an unhealthy thing to celebrate, but I don't know, because I like the music. I think I could drop the name and keep the same music. I think that many people took it in the wrong way, like if I was glorifying drug use. But I'm trying to do the opposite. I like the music a lot, but that name is stupid, straight up. (Robert)

Antonio expresses the problem even more forcefully. "It's horrible" to parse parts of his artistry to this or that persona. Never one to shy away from strong emotional language, "It's like dying," he says.

We know that an artist is experiencing detachment when he says, "Fuck off aliases!".

At this time of my career, when I start saying, "Fuck off aliases, I'm Antonio Flores," what would the promoters and bookers say? Maybe they won't book me anymore because they would have problems with their audience, or whatever. Now I realize they don't care... Right now I am crossing the line between Juan Antonio and Bad Copy. (Antonio)

Antonio is considering dropping his aliases entirely, but he hesitates. He's resigned, in the double-sense meaning of the term. About his aliases, he's ready to submit his resignation. But he might be willing to persist. It's not a good situation, he's resigned, for the moment. He might stay, he might leave. Or maybe he has

submitted his resignation as Bad Copy or Juan Antonio, but the official resignation is not yet set to take effect.⁹

Antonio's comment is indicative of the *Resigned* moment and of how it differs from *Failed* and *Cynical*. Unlike the *Failed* moment, Antonio's aliases have indeed received recognition. They have followers, and it starts to dawn on him that those followers might stay as loyal supporters. And moreover, that because of this, bookers and promoters will book him whether he performs as Bad Copy or Juan Antonio. Matteo formulates it clearly, "I think it comes down to what type of fans you have. If you have just an average fan base, it will expect something similar to the previous record. But that's a kind of junk food."



It is when the artist is detached from persona and yet the audience is attentive only to persona that the moment of identity crosses the line to *Cynical*. As Antonio says,

I never met a person in that top underground scene that was listening to techno at home. Because it's work, and the higher you go, the more professional it is. To be at this level means that your work needs to reflect more than just doing what you love... Can you imagine what happened if someone who gets paid more than €50,000 for two hours of play, can you imagine what happened if these guys would play what they want to play? No one would dance in the end, because when you play in this professional range, people who have paid more than €20 expect something from you. That's fair, it's okay. You need to deliver what they expect. Sure. And this is something only a few people can do. But they don't live it, they just do their work, and when they go home they are happy not to listen to techno music. They just enjoy their family, go to the studio, check their photos and what they're going to play the next weekend. Work, work, work. I love my job, it's a beautiful work. But I think at that level it's very, very tough. (Antonio)

Cynically, the artist goes through the motions, delivering what the audience expects without attachment to the persona they have paid to see and hear performing. And sometimes they don't even see the DJ.

Prince of Denmark made a back-to-back set with one alias back-to-back to another alias. And there were just computers playing, he was not even there. (Robert)



In the *Pretending* moment, by contrast, artists still feel that the persona expresses themselves, that it is a part of them. However, they also recognize that the audience is only interested in the personified character that is on stage. They are, therefore, not cynical about the performance. We refer to this

⁹ Antonio's words resonate with, and parallel, Jorge Luis Borges reflections on his persona, recalled in Matthews (2010: 359): "I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a dictionary... Little by little, I am giving over everything to him... I do not know which of us has written this page."

moment as “pretending” because our examples of it are truly episodic. The artist is attached to the alias/persona but it happens on a given night that that’s not the character the artist is in the mood to be. So, tonight the artist’s been booked as DJ Phobia and that’s the persona that will be impersonated.¹⁰ The artist, in this case Robert, has enough attachment to the persona that we can hazard the oxymoron that this is a kind of “genuine pretending” (Moeller & D’Ambrosio, 2017):

When I perform, I try to get myself in that mindset, get into the character. It’s kind of weird. ... It has to do with the DJ part, the personality, when you have to have fun, party. Most people that know me at face value, they think I am really fun, that I like partying and shit like that. I do to some extent, but I feel like I actually liked it six years ago and now don’t much. When I go out, there is an expectation, this idea of the self of other people, that you reflect back onto each other, they have these expectations, so you perform as this thing. (Robert)



How to deal with the “style prison” in which the artist experiences being locked by the audience into a particular persona? One way is to release music without using any name—neither the name one was given at birth nor an alias that one has given oneself. In electronic music this is the institution of the *white label*—a vinyl record with a white label glued on it (see also Formilan & Stark, 2020). This is the *Anonymous* moment of identity.¹¹ By refusing any signature (Hofer, 2006), the artist makes it impossible for the audience to be attentive to person or to experience the music through the filter of a known alias. Within the ideology of techno music, then, “it’s only about the music.” Sometimes a white label will be released by a very established artist. If the music catches on, so it can be claimed, it was not because of the reputation of the artist. “Let’s do something between friends, just for fun...If it goes, we put the name on it and sell it properly” (Alex). Sometimes it is because the material is still in a developmental stage, and artists “can put it out and see how the reactions from other DJs are, or from other labels, of whatever. It’s a way to trying and reaching people but unconnected to the original artist” (Georg).

Our informants were of two minds about white labels. On one hand, anonymity can be a part of a strategy to increase mystery, arouse rumors, perhaps even increase attentiveness about who is the artist behind the sound:

Maybe you’ve seen some of these white labels. Some of them have stamps on it, and sometimes there is no clear authorship – you see the stamp and you know, when you are into the scene, “This could be from this DJ, or from that

¹⁰ On impersonation in the performing arts, and especially adopting a gender study lens, see Baker, Burton and Smith (1994) and Dolan (1985).

¹¹ On the interrelations among anonymity, privacy, and the maintenance of social selves, see also Matthews (2010).

producer, but not sure.” And I think the scene wants this blurriness. They want to be in that grey area, because it’s interesting to be in that grey area. (Georg)

But others spoke of anonymity as an established practice, to be accepted on its own terms and not to be denounced as masking some ulterior motive:

On the other hand, a lot of people just accept it as it is, they are not urging to find out who [the artist] is, I mean, it’s become common for a few labels not to release artists’ name. They just have the label and what they stand for is the sound, basically. And some people accept, just accept this. There is a lot of acceptance happening without having to know who’s the person behind the label. (Yannik)

Still others pointed to another possibility—being famous for being anonymous:

There was this thing, particularly in Detroit, people like Underground Resistance, who produced this techno pulse... I think out of that circle of people there is also the idea of putting out stuff which is just about the music, not about faces, not commercial. Which is ambivalent because they have this very clear Underground Resistance logo which is very famous. (Alex)

In these cases, the artist is not releasing white labels and is performing using an alias. Here refusing any connection to person puts all attention to the masked persona:

There’s one artist called Traumprinz. He never appears in person, never does any show and never shows up. He is just releasing his music. In January or February, he released eight vinyl records at the same time, one big package. It was so hype, it was incredible. And no one knows who this person is. No one. And that is also interesting, because he or she maybe doesn’t want to get into the public, but at the same time we don’t know if this person is already in the public under another name. (Reka)

Conclusion

In our account of artistic identities among electronic music artists, we pointed to the notion of persona as a third element in the triadic dynamics of identity. Far from an esoteric practice, many of us curate personas in everyday life. In particular, we think about the creation and curation of online profiles¹² and how these have become a pervasive element in many people’s daily interactions in both social and work situations.

¹² On profiles, see especially Moeller and D’Ambrosio (2017, 2021) and Haferkamp and Kraemer (2011). On personas as an aspect of the transformation of the self in the context of digital hyperconnectivity (Otrell-Cass, 2019), see Brubaker (2020, esp. pp. 774–5). On the presentation and curation of self in online environments, see Hogan (2010), Ellison et al. (2006), and Toma et al. (2008).

In retail sales markets, for example, big-data analysis of people's online presence has pushed sales managers to be attentive to consumer personas rather than to the persons behind them (Samariüitel, 2017). In the job market, companies are known to avoid hiring candidates who do not possess an account on one or more of the main social media networks, since not having a public persona sounds suspicious (Hill, 2012). Meanwhile, the proliferation of social networking sites, platforms for peer-to-peer sharing, and topic-specific forums multiplies the number of operative profiles for any given person. In the contemporary digital environment, an individual will maintain and manage a good many personas simultaneously in various domains (Zhong et al., 2017).

Creating and repeatedly updating convincing personas has thus become a concern not just of digital fashion influencers or of professionals in show business and the arts. Instead, it is today a must for almost anyone who wants to participate in social exchange and interaction. In many online environments, the first step to be a participant is to develop and display a *profile*. Once created, it must also be updated, curated. As a window through which one's self receives attention, it must be attended to. When was the last time you created or updated your profile on a social media account? Most likely you have several.

The term, profile, evokes the idea of *figure*, as in silhouette. To be seen in profile is literally a one-sided view. When we read a "profile" on some public personage or celebrity personality, we know we are getting a highly stylized sketch rather than a detailed biography. And when we create and update our (differentiated) online profiles on various social media "accounts,"¹³ we know that the profile is meant to be a stylized presentation. As Pizzorno (1960/2010) showed in his analysis of the mask, the profile as silhouette presents some features while masking others in the shadow. Users understand that, whether sober or playful, the sentences or phrases that make up the profile should not be taken too seriously. That's because creating the caricature cutout (indeed, instead of filling out it is more like cutting out) is only the first step of curating an online persona. What matters is the ongoing behavior in which persona is manifested and recognized both on the part of the person and on the part of others. It is such ongoing behavior of curating personas, interacting with ego and alters, that we have analyzed in this article.

We are attentive to persona because, to be a person in the twenty-first Century, individuals have to manage multiple personas, often in their working life as well as in their personal life. Yet, while emphasizing the importance of persona, at no point have we equated persona and identity. Persona is an aspect of identity. Put on or put out, it is a part that stands apart. A probe, a test, a provocation, a persona is an object that alter can recognize and by which ego can be recognized.

Although one can casually speak about "having an identity," identity is not the possession of an individual. This brings us back to our opening paragraph in which we saw Joseph Adebayo presenting his given name as his chosen alias. But whereas an alias, like any name, can be chosen and/or given, identities are neither given nor

¹³ It is notable that the term "accounts" in this context resonates with bookkeeping and narration (see Stark, 2011a: 25).

chosen. Identity, we have argued, is shaped at the encounter among the person, the persona, and others. Identity exists in the movement among moments of shifting attachments.

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Giovanni Formilan is a Lecturer in Creative Industries at the University of Edinburgh Business School. His research focuses on innovation dynamics, with particular attention to the processes of development, classification, and reception of creative identities. In addition to ethnography, his published articles draw from diverse methods including social sequence analysis, quantitative visual analysis, and multivariate regression modeling.

David Stark is Arthur Lehman Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and also Professor of Social Science at the University of Warwick. Stark’s current research is supported by a five-year Advanced Career Award from the European Research Council for a project on “Diversity and Performance: Networks of Cognition in Markets and Teams.” Papers and presentations available at www.davidcstark.net.