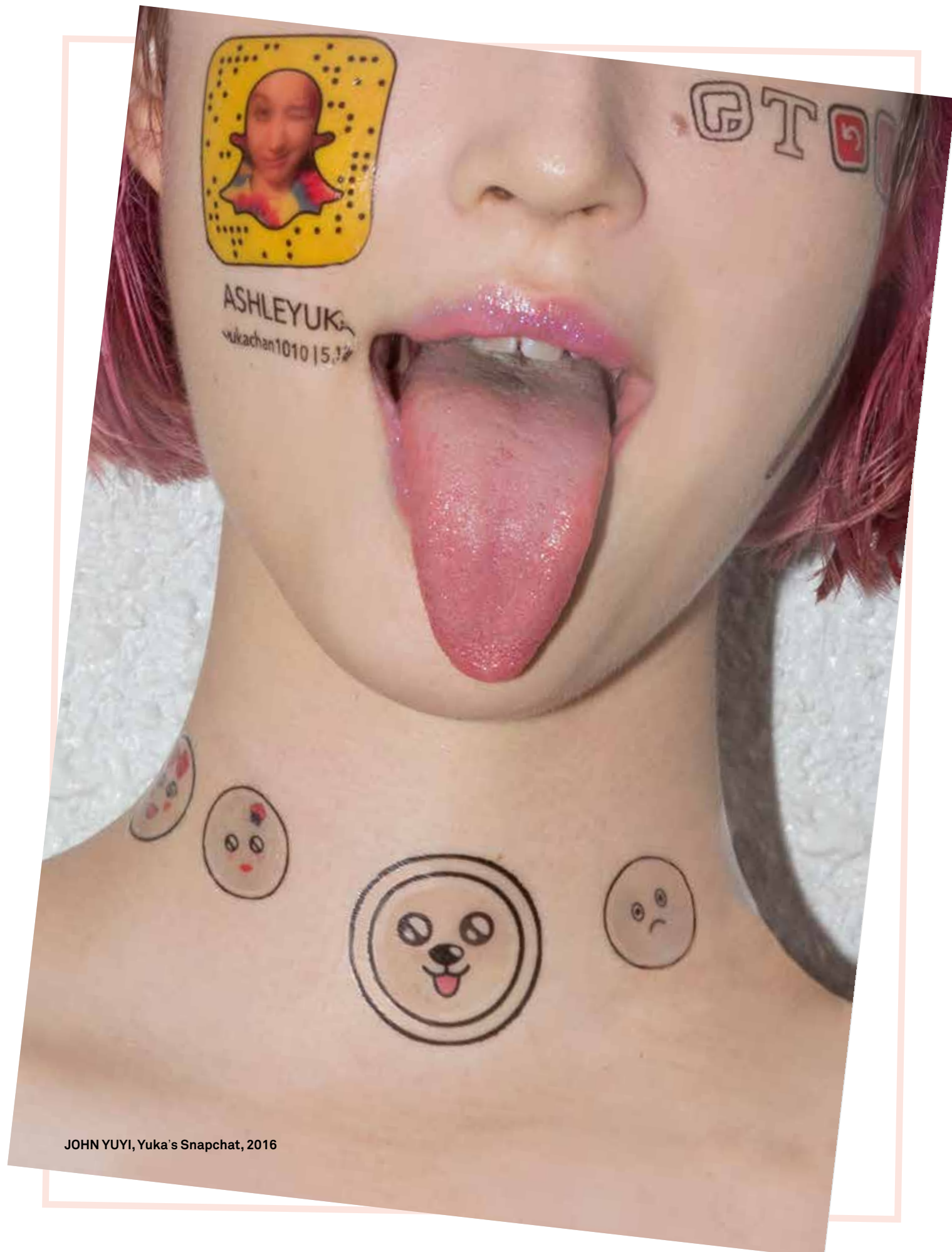


Redefining Representation

How the millennial artist John Yuyi uses the iconography of the digital age to grant the individual a new form of superiority

Photography JOHN YUYI
Writer ANNELI BOTZ



JOHN YUYI, Yuka's Snapchat, 2016



JOHN YUYI, VR Headset, 2017

Taiwanese artist John Yuyi represents another phenomenon of young artists that have made their career (with and) through the internet. Using the digital world as both platform and medium, John Yuyi has created an extensive portfolio of visual statements. These range from a pop-art swimsuit collection, to dry noodle piercings and temporary face and body tattoos that display people's social media accounts. Using the body and digital imagery as a canvas, John Yuyi has continuously managed to establish a versatile mode of representation of the self in times of post internet art. Observing current cultural developments with a fun but sharp gaze, her art work has gained a fast growing following and reputation. ID-Magazine called her "The Willy Wonka of the art world" and her unique aesthetic has even attracted Gucci's creative heads. Her collaboration with the luxury brand went online at the beginning of 2017 and was hailed a huge success. But who is John Yuyi, the person behind the colorful and precisely curated social media stream, the girl with the beautiful, fragile appearance who is often the topic of her own work?

John Yuyi's original name is Chiang Yuyi. Chiang being her

surname which she exchanged for John when she moved to New York a few years ago. It has a similar pronunciation and is easier to understand. She speaks slowly, with a very soft voice. She appears to carefully select every word she says, as if she is afraid to say something wrong, to be too straight forward. She explains that her English is not so great, although it is actually quite precise. Growing up in Taiwan, Yuyi has naturally internalized the cultural code of humbleness, of never coming across as overly confident. "The culture in Taiwan is a lot more traditional than in the Western world. To call yourself an artist is nothing that you say with pride," she says. "People also think that the term art only applies to classical stuff like painting. But the things that I am creating are far away from the stereotype of this kind of art. Still, my friends do not understand what I am doing. And I really do not feel comfortable saying that I am an artist myself either."

Another reason for her hesitation towards admitting her profession is the fact that she didn't study at a fine arts school, but holds a degree in fashion design. "Because I did not go to art school, this kind of makes me feel that I am not

qualified to be an artist. I don't know much about it, I am not educated enough," she explains.

From an outside perspective, the opposite is true. Throughout her work, Yuyi shows an intrinsic sensibility towards cultural developments and the capability to intuitively find an outlet that creates originality. Whether she uses instant noodles as ear piercings or shoe laces as eye iPhone chargers, John Yuyi takes everyday objects, turns them into art and creates something new through means of abstraction. When she applied for her artist visa to come to New York, she created a swimsuit line for her portfolio. Using her background in fashion, Yuyi combined colorful swimsuits with digital prints of everyday objects, such as a newspaper, a CD, a brush or a fried egg. The result is always a contemporary combination of the object trouvé and pop-art, represented via digital media.

This modus operandi could not be more apparent than in John Yuyi's most successful work so far, "Facepost." As a digital native with a self-admitted social media addiction, the artist spent a lot of time on her Instagram, Facebook and Tumblr accounts. Being the protagonist of many of her works, she often used her body and nudity as a means of representation, or as



JOHN YUYI, The Face, 2016



JOHN YUYI X Gucci #TFWGucci Project, 2017



JOHN YUYI, Shoe Laces Charger, 2016

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JOHN YUYI, *Need Wasabi*, 2016

the canvas for her work. One day she came up with the idea that it would be fun to have her face on Facebook, and Facebook on her face. As a result she created temporary tattoos that were a copy of her social media presence. "I did not think about it as art at all in the beginning. I was thinking about social media and what we are doing with it everyday, how we are posting on Instagram, on Twitter, Tumblr or Youtube. So I decided to use the photos we post, the selfies I took and to put it back on the face. And then that result was again being reposted on Facebook. It seemed like a fun cycle at the time."

And it turned into a very successful one. The internet society responded well to the combination of faces and bodies with the seamlessly smooth skin and the delicately applied tattoos. These tattoos, all social media icons and posts, speak the new but universal language of digital iconography. In an interesting way, John Yuyi has taken the Aristotelian idea of mimesis, of the representation of an idea through art and has twisted it around. The icon or Facebook post, as a representation of digital reality is reapplied to the origin of its imagery, the body, the face, which will then be reposted as another image, on Facebook. Modes of representation have been equalized and the individual, that often seems to get lost within the never ending stream of social network imagery, has been given back its substance.

Although John Yuyi is shy in the manner she presents herself, her visual language is clearly a different one. Next to the colorful

intersection between fashion and art and the use of everyday objects with relation to elements of digitalization, another important tool is the representation of the self, of the skin, of the body, of her body. "I am generally very attracted by bodies and the skin. We are all human, so once people see something with body and skin they will have a mutual understanding between the art and themselves," she says. For her "Skin on Skin" project, Yuyi applied nude pictures of herself on pieces of meat and fish. A pin-up on a piece of skin, if you will.

There is no doubt about the amount of creative outlet, this artist needs. But after all, the expression through her art is also a matter of pure necessity for John Yuyi. A few years ago she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which in phases lets her go from one extreme emotional state to the other, from hyper activeness to complete depression. John Yuyi speaks

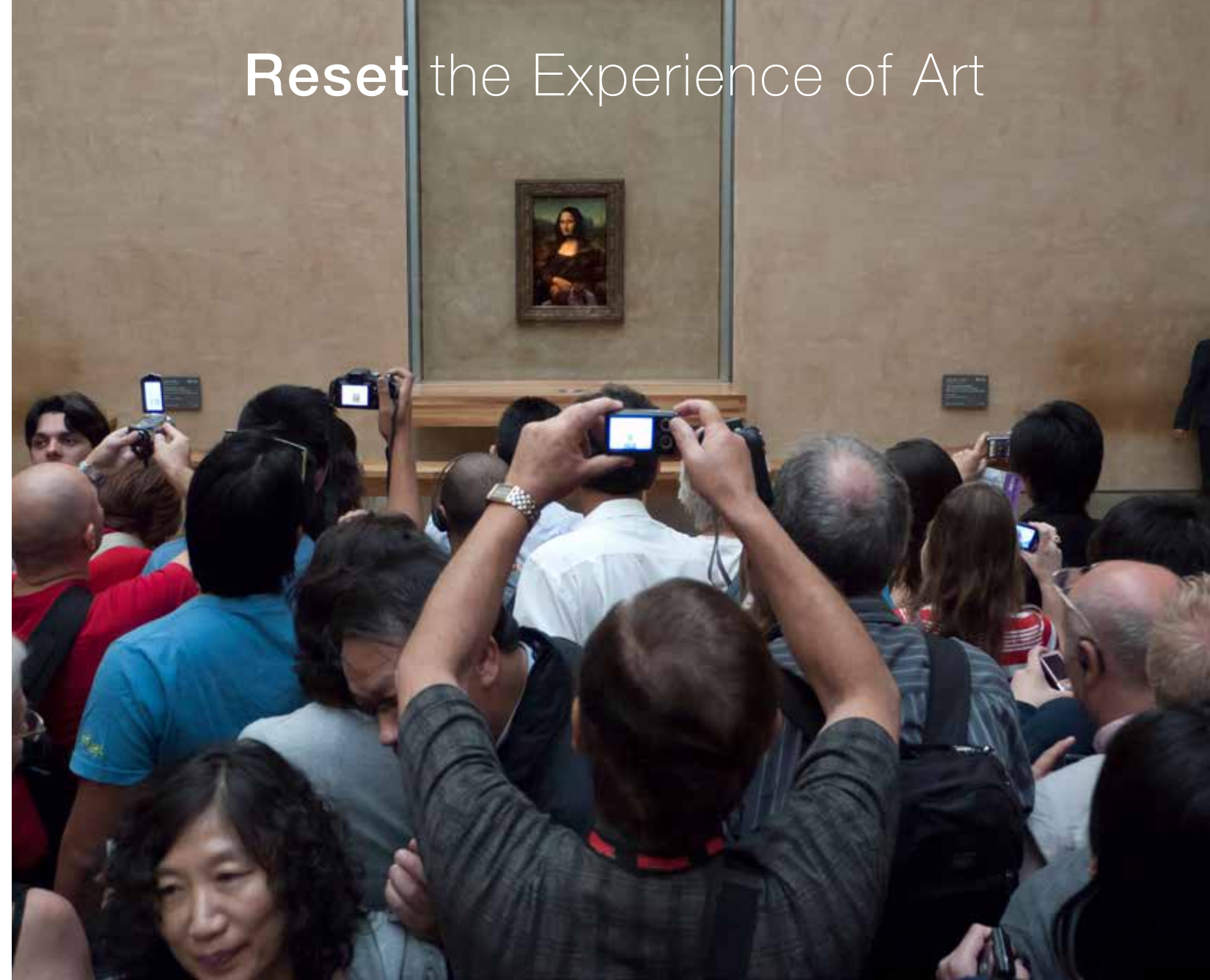
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openly about her disorder, she has learned to accept it and to live with it. "I think people can sense that I have a mental problem, that I am kind of crazy." We both laugh, nevertheless understanding the enormous impact the disorder must have on her everyday life and wellbeing. "I think this one reason why I am being so productive. Last year, when it got really bad, I kept busy through work to ease my anxiety and to try and keep everything negative out," she explains.

I wonder, whether her constant exposure to the internet goes well with such a state of mind, but Yuyi's attitude towards the digital world is positive and her work is not meant as a critique towards the system. She rather sees an opportunity for self marketing and economic independency. "I feel it is something very positive that in this generation you don't need to have a gallery or an agent to present yourself. You can simply do it through a social media platform. And even though you are not paying anything, you still have your audience and different opportunities." While the feedback towards her work from her followers is positive, there was one situation that was less affirmative. A while ago, John Yuyi gave an interview to the BBC. Knowing that a news channel has a different audience than her own Instagram account, the negative feedback via the BBC's Facebook page did not take her by surprise. "I don't care that much about what people think of me. People will always judge what they do not understand," she states. "But something was interesting. Some comments read something like: "I really hate people saying that they are artists, but they don't have talent." These sorts of remarks all came from Asian people. Which is basically the confirmation of what I said in the beginning, and how people from Asia value art differently and how it is not seen as something good, to present yourself as a contemporary artist," she explains, seeming more happy than taken aback by the critic. She seems to be fully at ease with the democratic manner of free speech within the digital world but has yet to discover that the originality she applies to her thoughts and ideas is, in fact, one of a true artist.

Image credit: John Yuyi

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