

“Synthesizing the Real:” The comprehensive, trans-musical philosophy of SOPHIE and PC Music

Introduction

Artificial bloom
Hydroponic Skin
Chemical Release
Synthesize the real...

SOPHIE, “Faceshopping,” from *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides*¹

The overarching objective of this project was to explore, articulate, and connect the theories of identity, authenticity, and gender communicated through the music, production processes, performances, and explicit discourse of the producer, artist, and DJ known as SOPHIE, and SOPHIE’s broader community of like-minded, hyperbolic pop producers and artists known as PC Music.² A highly influential and experimental group of electronic musicians whose production credits range from pop icons like Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Charli XCX, to hip hop artists like Vince Staples, Kendrick Lamar, and Tommy Cash, SOPHIE and the PC Music collective are widely known for their exaggerated presentations of consumerism and commodification, and their “hyper” take on mainstream popular music. SOPHIE in particular was praised for almost hyperreal sounding, electronically synthesized sound design, and, later in SOPHIE’s career, for being a voice for the transgender community and the influence for a new wave of queer and trans artists.

¹ SOPHIE, “Faceshopping,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-faceshopping-lyrics>

² SOPHIE preferred to simply be referred to as SOPHIE, free from the constraints of any gendered or non-binary pronouns.

As I was pondering ways to cohesively present SOPHIE and PC Music's commentary on identity, music production, and gender (It was apparent that these facets of SOPHIE's life and worldview were deeply connected), I was struck by the last line in the above excerpt from SOPHIE's song "Faceshopping," which reads, "synthesize the real."

This Paper relies upon the phrase "synthesize the real" as a guiding light used to elucidate not only SOPHIE's conceptions of gender and transness, but of the broader process of constructing any identity or persona. In the first section of the paper, I explore how SOPHIE and PC Music exaggerate tropes of consumerism and popular culture in order to make transparent processes inherent to neoliberal capitalism, namely hyper-individualized branding. This is done not as a cynical mockery of popular music and culture, but as a way to comment on the deliberate and meticulous fabrication of all artistic identities in today's neoliberal socioeconomic reality. In this way, SOPHIE and PC Music argue that all artists, and more broadly, everyone, "synthesizes the real" when it comes to the construction and presentation of identity.

The second section of this paper focuses solely on the production style of SOPHIE, who, as an unparalleled sound designer, went a step further than other PC Music producers by using electronic synthesis to recreate the sounds and textures of real world objects and materials. However, the materials of SOPHIE's choice were always those which are artificially created, or "synthesized," from clanking, metal pot-like snare drums, to sound design which intended to emulate rubber, silicone, and latex. This production ethos is the second way in which SOPHIE's work is epitomized by the phrase "synthesize the real."

Lastly, I connect this production process both to SOPHIE and PC Music's aforementioned philosophy of identity and enthusiastic embrace of consumerist aesthetics, as well as to SOPHIE's commentary on the artist's experiences of self-construction and transition

as a transgender individual (the final way in which SOPHIE “synthesizes the real,” and the way in which the phrase was originally meant to be interpreted in “Faceshopping”).

SOPHIE strongly believed in the communication of self through sound, as well as in the relationship between sound design, lyrical content, visual aesthetics, and live performance.³ By exploring the ways in which SOPHIE’s musical persona, sound design and production, and transgender experience epitomized the phrase “synthesize the real,” and by delineating the connections between these three definitions, I present what could be called the comprehensive “trans-musical” philosophy of creating, presenting, performing, and living so beautifully embodied in every visible aspect of SOPHIE’s life.

PC Music, Branding, and The Synthesis of “Real” Identities

My face is the front of shop
My face is the real shop front
My shop is the face I front
I’m real when I shop my face

SOPHIE, “Faceshopping,” from *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides* ⁴

Throughout SOPHIE’s career, the Scottish-born producer was widely recognized as a core member of PC Music – an internet savvy group of like-minded producers, vocalists, performance and visual artists. Although PC Music is technically an independent record label founded in 2013 by English producer A.G. Cook (an early and intimate collaborator of SOPHIE’s), PC Music can also be conceived of as a much broader artistic collective whose highly collaborative members extend beyond the label’s exclusive roster. Although SOPHIE

³ Chal Ravens, “SOPHIE: behind the mixing board and under pop’s bonnet, *The Face*, May 29, 2020, <https://theface.com/music/sophie-behind-the-boards-pop-scottish-producer>

⁴ SOPHIE, “Faceshopping,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-faceshopping-lyrics>

never released any solo work through PC Music, SOPHIE did frequently tour and collaborate with members of the PC Music label. Further, PC Music producers like A.G. Cook frequently used SOPHIE's unique drum and FX samples, and thus SOPHIE had a great amount of influence over the label and collective's signature sound.

From its inception, PC Music was intended to be an experiment in popular music and culture. As relatively unknown creatives, the members of PC Music exploded onto the club and pop music scenes donning outfits and constructing personae which imitated the richest and most famous of popstars. They threw events like Pop Cube, their well-documented New York City debut at Brooklyn's BRIC House, to which they arrived in seemingly the world's longest SUV stretch limousine.⁵ Throughout the Pop Cube event, members of the collective behaved like celebrities: PC Music producer and DJ Danny L Harle maneuvered through large swarms of paparazzi as they took flash photographs, artist GFOTY (Girlfriend of The Year) tossed handfuls of cash into the air during her set, and the entire collective posed together on a long red carpet in front of a backdrop plastered with corporate style PC Music and SOPHIE logos. Of course, the money GFOTY tossed was fake, and many members of the press were staged (in some photos it is quite apparent that some of the paparazzi were wearing event "Staff" t-shirts).⁶

⁵ Red Bull Music Academy, "Gallery: PC Music & SOPHIE: Pop Cube," *Red Bull Music Academy*, May 11, 2015, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/05/gallery-pc-music-sophie-pop-cube>

⁶ James Rettig, "The Weird, Wonderful World of PC Music's Pop Cube," *Stereogum*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.stereogum.com/1800555/the-weird-wonderful-world-of-pc-musics-pop-cube/photo/>



Fig 1. GFOTY exits the SUV limousine and poses for the “press” at PC Music’s Pop Cube event, held at BRIC House in Brooklyn.⁷



Fig 2. PC Music founder A.G. Cook at Pop Cube, wearing a shirt with a Red Bull logo and posing with a Red Bull in hand.⁸

⁷ Rettig, “Weird.”

⁸ Schiano, “Photos.”



Fig 3. SOPHIE and Hannah Diamond pose in front of the red carpet backdrop, the visible portion of which contains Red Bull, SOPHIE, PC Music, and Pop Cube logos.⁹

Placing themselves within the long lineage of super sparkly, hyperbolized musical acts akin to those from the Glam Rock era, to pop vocalists like Madonna or Lady Gaga, the PC Music collective garnered much of its initial press coverage by deliberately toying with and exaggerating quintessential aesthetics of consumerism and late capitalism. For instance, A.G. Cook flaunted the fact that the notorious energy drink company Red Bull sponsored and promoted PC Music’s Pop Cube event by wearing athletic apparel covered in Red Bull logos, and posing in front of the “paparazzi” while sipping from a can of Red Bull, which he waved

⁹ Brooklyn Vegan Staff, “PC Music presented ‘Pop Cube’ at BRIC House w/ Hannah Diamond, QT, GFOTY, SOPHIE, and more,” *Brooklyn Vegan*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.brooklynvegan.com/pc-music-presen/>

around in a rather obvious manner.¹⁰ PC Music producer Finn Keane, known by his stage name EASYFUN, stole his moniker directly from a Jeff Koons exhibit of the same name, which primarily consists of shiny, colored mirrors and plastic, deconstructed children's toys.¹¹ GFOTY released a 2017 compilation album entitled *GFOTYBUCKS*, the artwork of which portrays a larger than life Starbucks iced coffee photoshopped next to the singer, who is dressed in an American flag top and sparkling silver heels (As writer Dan Weiss remarked in his 2014 *Spin* feature on PC Music, "Warhol would be proud").¹² The performance artist QT spent her entire career with PC Music promoting a self-developed energy drink called DrinkQT (an exaggerated consumerist fantasy in which fans literally consume QT).¹³ Perhaps no one was more heavy-handed in their appropriation of consumerist aesthetics than SOPHIE, whose debut compilation album was literally entitled *Product*, and who, when asked by Billboard what style of music *Product* was, simply replied, "advertising" (the physical release of SOPHIE's *Product* came with an additional "product," which was made of silicone and was said to have looked like a sex toy, although the product's purpose was never specified and was thus left up to the user).¹⁴

PC Music's engagement with tropes of consumerism and mass commodification, and members' fabrication of celebrity personae are never subtle, and according to the collective,

¹⁰ Maxwell Schiano, "Photos: PC Music and SOPHIE at Pop Cube, New York," *Fact Magazine*, May 11, 2015, <https://www.factmag.com/2015/05/11/photos-pc-music-pop-cube/>

¹¹ Spencer Kornhaber, "The Gloriously Tacky Future of Music," *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/03/pc-music-at-sxsw-and-the-gloriously-tacky-future-of-music/388478/>

¹² Dan Weiss, "Trend of the Year: How PC Music Chewed Up Pop Conventions," *Spin*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.spin.com/2014/12/pc-music-sophie-qt-ag-cook-trend-of-the-year-best-of-2014/>

¹³ Tom Lea, "Hey QT! An Interview with 2014's most love-her-or-hate-her pop star," *Fact Magazine*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.factmag.com/2014/09/09/hey-qt-an-interview-with-2014s-most-love-her-or-hate-her-pop-star/>

¹⁴ Kristin Westcott Grant, "U.K. Producer SOPHIE Q&A: On Secrecy, Synthesis & What's Next," *Billboard*, August 19, 2014, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/6221915/sophie-producer-interview/>; Jeremy Gordon, "SOPHIE Releasing Singles Collection With 'Silicon Product' (That Sure Looks Like a Sex Toy)," *Pitchfork*, September 29, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/news/61411-sophie-releasing-singles-collection-with-silicon-product-that-sure-looks-like-a-sex-toy/>

that's exactly the point. Contrary to much of the initial commentary and criticism the collective received from online publications, PC Music's intentions are far from cynical or parodic in the sense that they exaggerate pop musical and cultural tropes for comic effect, or out of a disdain for their aesthetics. Time and time again, members of the PC Music collective have asserted how much they genuinely love and are inspired by pop music, as well as the processes typically carried out by the music industry, such as the A&R process at major record labels, branding, marketing, and the development of a holistic product (the music in addition to album artwork, social media graphics, photoshoots, brand endorsements, music videos, TV appearances, etc.).¹⁵ Take PC Music vocalist, visual artist and fashion designer Hannah Diamond, who adores retouching her own portraits in Adobe Photoshop, and who has talked at length about the process of airbrushing her own photos.¹⁶



Fig 4. *GFOTYBUCKS* artwork.

¹⁵ Sohrab Golsorkhi-Ainslie, "Radio Tank Mix: A.G. Cook," *TANK Magazine*, August 25, 2013, <https://tankmagazine.com/tank/live-archive-music/radio-tank-mix-a-g-cook/>; ¹⁵ Simon Vozick-Levinson, "PC Music Are for Real: A.G. Cook and Sophie Talk Twisted Pop," *Rolling Stone*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/pc-music-are-for-real-a-g-cook-and-sophie-talk-twisted-pop-58119/>

¹⁶ Sam Wolfson, "PC Music: the future of pop or 'contemptuous parody'?" *The Guardian*, May 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/02/pc-music-dance-music-collective>



Fig 5. “Hey QT” single artwork, which features QT’s energy drink “DrinkQT.”



Fig 6. A hyperreal portrait of PC Music’s Hannah Diamond.¹⁷

¹⁷ Wolfson, “future.”

Instead, the collective's *overt display* and *self-exposure* of its corporate sponsors, fake paparazzi, highly digitized and edited (almost hyperreal) visuals, and the economic reality of music-as-commodity works to perform an honesty or transparency, with the hope that viewers and listeners will come to see the tactics (like branding and meticulous self-fashioning) used to construct all musical identities, regardless of the "packaging" (musical and aesthetic preferences) in which an artist and their music are "delivered" to the world. In a 2020 interview with *Vulture*, A.G. Cook explains that he believes the differences marked between various types of musical identities to be "pretty inaccurate and kind of funny... Saying that, like, Adele is more authentic than Lady Gaga... that's random. They're interesting because they're presenting themselves in different ways, but each one is thought about as a rollout. There's no way it's not two brands that have the same mix of real and fake."¹⁸

To Cook, categorizing an artist like Lady Gaga (who used to write hyper-consumerist and heavily processed pop songs with titles like "Money Honey," and who is notorious for her extravagant and exaggerated outfits and performances) as less "authentic," or real, than Adele (who sings minimalist acoustic ballads, standing still, often in tame, non-flashy clothing) would be a mistake, as both artists ultimately engage in the same process of deliberate identity construction. In an interview with A.G. Cook published in *Rolling Stone*, SOPHIE corroborates Cook's take that all artists engage in this same meticulous process of self-curation, as well as emphasizes again the role that branding and corporate sponsorships play in the development of a musical identity: "more and more, you're going to see everything funded by sponsors. Why not

¹⁸ Justin Curto, "7 Key Elements of the A.G. Cook Sound, According to A.G. Cook," *Vulture*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/09/a-g-cook-interview-7g-apple-debut-album.html>

utilize those opportunities and bring them to the fore and be honest about the interaction? I don't think that's anything to hide.”¹⁹

The observations and predictions made by SOPHIE and A.G. Cook regarding the role of branding in the lives of musicians and the music industry have been supported and detailed by scholarship like Timothy Taylor's *Music and Capitalism*. In his chapter on neoliberal forms of “Brands and Branding,” Taylor examines the ways in which artists have progressively entered into more relationships with corporations in order to sell their music (for example, by bundling their albums with a Samsung app, or by contributing to a music themed Pepsi ad), as well as the ways in which brands have infiltrated the music business (Taylor actually cites Red Bull as an example, as the company has started its own record label and has funded other live music events akin to PC Music's Pop Cube). More interesting, however, is the way in which neoliberalism (with its emphasis on hyper-individuality and the notion of the brand) has resulted in artists being taught to *consider themselves as individual brands*. As Taylor notes in *Music and Capitalism*, “today, it is routine to read *Advertising Age* and see major musicians referred to as brands. And how-to-guides for budding professional musicians in this century frequently offer advice on how to brand oneself.”²⁰

By placing a corporate sponsor's logo on performance attire, or side-by-side with one's own name, or by identifying an album as that which it fundamentally is- a *Product*- PC Music members like SOPHIE and A.G. Cook seek to make transparent the neoliberal processes at the core of, and which ultimately enable, all popular music. Further, by interweaving the SOPHIE, PC Music, and Red Bull logos along the same red carpet backdrop, or by designing the *Product* album artwork so that the cover solely reads “SOPHIE,” instead of “Product” (as if SOPHIE and

¹⁹ Vozick-Levinson, “Twisted Pop.”

²⁰ Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 54 – 62.

Product are synonymous), the artists draw attention to the branding which is foundational to the development of individual artistic identities, regardless of the size of the artist, their team, their label, or, most important to SOPHIE and Cook, regardless of the style of music an artist creates.



Fig 7. Hannah Diamond poses in front of the red carpet backdrop at Pop Cube.²¹



Fig 8. *Product* artwork in CD form, which contains the iconic “SOPHIE” logo.

²¹ Red Bull Music Academy, “Gallery.”

In *Music and Capitalism*, Taylor quotes a director of music at a major advertising agency who asserts that “indie-inflected music serves as a kind of Trojan horse,” meaning that, while indie genres appear to be free from the grasp of the consumerism and the “selling out” to corporations so often associated with stereotypically “mainstream” popular music (PC Music included), the performance of that freedom is just another way to brand oneself (and is often still supported by brands, as Taylor demonstrates in his exploration of the sneaker brand Converse’s initiative to record up-and-coming indie rock acts in their new studio).²²

The politics of artist branding today are reminiscent of the observation Kier Keightley made in 2001 regarding the distance from the mainstream claimed by indie rock artists at the time: “indie rock’s valorization of non-major label productions and of the act of purchasing music directly from bands themselves at gigs missed the fact that indie and mainstream musical consumption are both part of consumer capitalism, different only in their degree of their complicity.”²³ Perhaps we can also add, “different also in their decision to *perform* a distance from the aesthetics of mainstream popular music.” In a similar fashion, SOPHIE, A.G. Cook, and the PC Music collective assert, through their musical identities and their discursive theorizing in interviews, that all artists, as individuals subjected to a neoliberal socioeconomic reality, engage in the same process of *branding oneself*, and thus all consciously and meticulously “synthesize” what perhaps appear to be “authentic” or “real” identities, depending on how those identities are ultimately interpreted by critics and fans. It is this process that we might call “synthesizing the real,” as the phrase relates to the construction of identity.

²² Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 58-59.

²³ Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 109–142.

One motivation the PC Music collective might have for arguing that all artists “synthesize the real” in this way is that it works to self-justify their own musical personae. PC Music believes that everyone conceives of themselves as brands, and therefore everyone artificially fabricates a branded self which they then present to the world as organic, real, authentic. If this is the case, then established modes of authentication become arbitrary, and PC Music artists are free to engage with all of the consumerist and commercialized aesthetics they please, without being labelled as inauthentic or as “sellouts,” since, by their definition, everyone sells out to some degree.

Sparking discourse on this concept of “synthesizing the real” also seems of great importance to PC Music creatives because of the genuine love they share for mainstream music and culture, as well as the aesthetics typically associated with consumerism. As journalist Dan Weiss correctly hypothesized in his 2014 *Spin* feature on the collective, PC Music seems to exaggerate popular musical and cultural tropes not because they view pop as something *to parody*, but as something that is “*worth parodying*.”²⁴ As previously mentioned, Hannah Diamond is known for photoshopping and airbrushing her photographs (two processes often stereotyped as artificial, or inorganic, and thus inauthentic) to the point where the finished product almost looks like digital rendering of herself. Yet, Diamond explained in an interview with *The Guardian* that it is primarily through photo editing and fashion design that she feels like she is able to genuinely express herself, even more than through her music.²⁵ Similarly, QT’s only track- “Hey QT”- and its accompanying music video seemed as though they served as advertisements for her energy drink venture far more than “DrinkQT” served as an advertisement for her music.

²⁴ Weiss, “Trend.”

²⁵ Wolfson, “future.”

When one examines the personae and visual aesthetics of the PC Music collective, it becomes apparent that members heavily draw upon quintessential images of consumerism, and upon artists whose work has provoked discourse on the notion of art-as-commodity, not only to communicate their philosophy of identity, but also to genuinely celebrate and seek inspiration from those images and artists. SOPHIE was deeply inspired by Madonna (for whom SOPHIE would eventually co-produce the track “Bitch I’m Madonna”), and some of SOPHIE’s frequently worn performance attire bore an uncanny resemblance to the iconic “Material Girl” look.²⁶ The artwork for EASYFUN’s *Deep Trouble* EP appears as if it was indeed designed by Jeff Koons, if Jeff Koons had been born in 1995 and had mastered both Photoshop and the popular computer game *The Sims*. In an interview which celebrated the launch of PC Music in 2013, A.G. Cook excitedly rattled off a plethora of his influences, including “the intense creative worlds of people like Ryan Trecartin... or cultural ‘prototypes’ like Max Headroom and Pee Wee Herman,” as well as “shiny” and “slickly produced” musical projects like Scritti Politti’s *Cupid and Psyche*⁸⁵, and the production work of pop mega-producer Max Martin.²⁷

²⁶ Vozick-Levinson, “Twisted Pop.”

²⁷ Curto, “A.G. Cook.”; Golsorkhi-Ainslie, “Tank Mix.”



Fig 9. Madonna in the music video for her hit song “Material Girl.”²⁸



Fig 10. and Fig 11. SOPHIE’s take on the “Material Girl” look.²⁹

²⁸ Madonna, “Madonna – Material Girl [Official HD Music Video],” YouTube video, 4:45, August 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p-IDYPR2P8>

²⁹ Coco Romack, “OUT100: SOPHIE, Artist of the Year,” *Out*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/11/14/out100-sophie-artist-year>; Justin Moran, “Gallery: SOPHIE’s Live Los Angeles Debut Was Legendary,” *Out*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.out.com/music/2017/10/31/gallery-sophies-live-los-angeles-debut>

Ultimately, PC Music's commentary on the ways in which all artists "synthesize the real" aims to dissolve certain binaries which have been culturally constructed, and which are used to differentiate between musical identities. One of the divides which seems to be of particular interest to the PC Music collective is the one drawn between artists who present as more overtly commercialized, such as the archetypical "popstar" (Cook uses Lady Gaga or Katy Perry as examples, although one could replace Gaga or Perry with just about any one of the members of PC Music) and the casual-looking, "you could have a beer with them" brand of indie or acoustic artists (Cook cites Ed Sheeran and Adele as popular examples). In a 2020 interview with *The Fader* in which he gives his most detailed response on the topics of identity and authenticity, Cook explains:

[A similar binary] is authenticity versus something being fake- I was always joking about people saying that Adele and Ed Sheeran are more real, more authentic, than, say, Katy Perry or Beyoncé. It's all clearly just different types of branding, and actually the ambiguity that slips through this uncanniness- like, 'Oh, well, that was actually maybe a bit of the real them that slipped through"- that's actually the commonality of so many artists' projects. You sometimes don't know: is it a real breakdown that someone's going through? Or is that still part of their brand and how that's documented? I think the way that things are presented and documented, that slight ambiguity or uncanniness is actually just getting closer to an approximation of what's true or genuine. On a similar level too, they just sound musically more interesting to me, those hiccups, those moments where something either is authentic or not, or electronic or acoustic, and you don't know which."³⁰

To Cook and the PC Music collective, the common thread linking all artistic identities is that they are ultimately brands which are carefully "presented." As is evidenced by many of the quotations in this paper, the members of PC Music don't seem to view this as a bad thing, and often find the "ambiguity" which results from the deliberate construction of an identity to be quite exciting. Theoretically, the ability to consciously consider, carefully construct, and present

³⁰ Shaad D'Souza, "How A.G. Cook became pop's great disruptor," *The Fader*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.thefader.com/2020/09/21/a-g-cook-apple-7g-interview-profile-2020>

a public persona might empower an artist to construct and present the version of themselves they desire, as well as determine for themselves what counts as an authentic identity and, as important, an authentic musical endeavor.

In the wake of SOPHIE's sudden death in January of 2021, I noticed that one SOPHIE quotation in particular seemed to be posted, both by my friends (fellow SOPHIE fans) and by major publications, more often than others. When asked by *Rolling Stone* about the music associated with both the PC Music collective and the "biggest popstars on the planet" for whom they produce (like Madonna), SOPHIE replied:

I think all pop music should be about who can make the loudest, brightest thing. That, to me, is an interesting challenge, musically and artistically. And I think it's a very valid challenge- just as valid as who can be the most raw emotionally. I don't know why that is prioritized by a lot of people as something that is more valuable. The challenge I'm interested in being part of is who can use current technology, current images and people, to make the brightest, most intense, engaging thing.³¹

It is in this response that the visual aesthetics and identities of SOPHIE and PC Music ("current images and people") are connected to the kind of music associated with the collective ("the brightest, most intense, engaging thing"). On a musical level, foundational to the PC Music ethos is the belief that maximalist, bright, and above all, "engaging" music (once again, think PC Music, or an archetypical electro-pop icon like Lady Gaga) should be considered to be "just as valid" as a "raw," emotional performance (once again, think Adele or Ed Sheeran). SOPHIE's statement implies that the authenticity an artist achieves by way of an emotionally raw performance should also be achievable by the skillful production of a bright and upbeat pop anthem.

³¹ Vozick-Levinson, "Twisted Pop."

Another binary the PC Music project has sought to collapse through its emphasis on the fabrication of identity has been the distinction between “celebrity” and “fan,” which has had a fruitful and lasting impact on PC Music’s musical community. At their debut Pop Cube event in Brooklyn, members of the collective strolled down the aforementioned red carpet, and posed for photos and interviews in front of the backdrop covered in SOPHIE, PC Music, and Red Bull logos, before entering into the venue. However, the red carpet used by the collective did not lead them through a side door or VIP entrance, but through the event’s main doors. Seconds after the PC Music artists had entered into the venue, event-goers were let in the same exact way. They were encouraged to walk the red carpet, take photographs with their friends in front of the same backdrops (some PC Music artists stuck around to take pictures with fans), and were interviewed by the same “reporters” (event staff). Those interviews were broadcasted solely to TV monitors which were positioned to face back out at the fans who were currently being interviewed, as if their instantaneously fabricated pop stardom was being reflected back for them to see and to reflect upon, along with the rest of the crowd on the red carpet. ³²



Fig 12. QT poses with fans on the Red Carpet of Pop Cube.³³

³² Brooklyn Vegan Staff, “BRIC.”

³³ Red Bull Music Academy, “Gallery.”



Fig 13. Event hosts stand in front of reflective TV monitors on the red carpet of the Pop Cube event.³⁴

Through overtly acknowledging and displaying the inherent artificiality and deliberate construction involved in the development of their identities, and then allowing their fans to engage in those same exact processes (photoshoots with fake paparazzi, the red carpet walk through the main entrance, the “televised” interviews), the PC Music collective has essentially communicated to their fans that, as SOPHIE wrote in the song “Immaterial,” “you could be me and... I could be you.”³⁵ This sentiment has proven to be quite important to the PC Music collective. Despite *presenting* far more like an Atlantic Records showcase than a group of friends running an indie operation out of their basement, PC Music has indeed remained an independent record label and collective (even through its dramatic rise in popularity), with none of its

³⁴ Brooklyn Vegan Staff, “BRIC.”

³⁵ SOPHIE, “Immaterial,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-immaterial-lyrics>

associated acts being signed to major recording contracts (except for Charli XCX, who is more so a popstar for whom PC Music often produces).

Therefore, the collective has done a phenomenal job promoting a DIY culture in which fans end up becoming artists, some of whom have even gone on to collaborate with members of PC Music. For example, the artist known as Fraxiom has cited SOPHIE as a primary inspiration, has referenced PC Music and PC Music events in their music, and has even released an EP produced by Umru, a producer and artist signed to the PC Music label.³⁶ Dorian Electra, a contemporary collaborator of PC Music who is well known for their multitude of outrageous character personae (from “finance bro” to sexually dominant “daddy”), has cited the way in which PC Music has toyed with the notion of the “popstar” as the primary inspiration for their own experimentation with the archetype.³⁷ In dissolving the divide between popstar and fan, PC Music’s philosophy of identity extends beyond the realm of musical personae and makes a commentary on the synthesis of all identities.

In the beginning of this section, I quoted the hook from SOPHIE’s track “Faceshopping,” which reads, “My face is the front of shop/My face is the real shop front/My shop is the face I front/I’m real when I shop my face.”³⁸ As journalist Rich Juzwiak, who conducted an interview with SOPHIE for *Jezebel*, cleverly noted, the term “Faceshopping” shifts in meaning as SOPHIE and co-writer Cecile Believe toy with syntax throughout those four lines.³⁹ The word “Shop” can mean “shopping,” as in consumption (perhaps the consumption of a “face,” as in the

³⁶ Fraxiom, Twitter Post, January 30, 2021, 10:58 AM, <https://twitter.com/fraxiommusic/status/1355545874160623618?lang=en>

³⁷ Arte TRACKS, “How PC Music defined a new kind of pop (Interview A.G. Cook, SOPHIE, Charli XCX),” YouTube video, 15:08, December 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INSugJy1BBw&t=196s>

³⁸ SOPHIE, “Faceshopping,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-faceshopping-lyrics>

³⁹ Rich Juzwiak, “SOPHIE on Her New Album, Old Disco, and Expressing Trans Identity in Music,” *Jezebel*, June 15, 2018, <https://themuse.jezebel.com/sophie-on-her-new-album-old-disco-and-expressing-trans-1826863700>

consumption of a person, as was depicted by SOPHIE's *Product* artwork, or by QT's energy drink "DrinkQT"). "Shop" can also imply "shop around," as in "market," or "sell" (to "shop a face," then, would be synonymous with our definition of "synthesize the real," as in the presentation of a branded identity). As Juzwiak states, the lyrics of Faceshopping allude to the ways in which "technology's increasing options for self-presentation (like Facetuning) enhance our ability to express our identity, as opposed to taking away from it by obscuring the reality of our physical flesh." Perhaps the process of "Faceshopping" can be achieved by "Photoshopping," as in the case of Hannah Diamond.⁴⁰

In an interview with *The Face*, SOPHIE confirmed that the message of "Faceshopping" extended beyond the depiction of SOPHIE's experiences with gender transition, and sought to explore the continual process of working on and reflecting upon the reality of one's cultivated and publicly presented self:

It's basically about how you relate to how you present yourself. Is it you that's in the mirror? Are you the person looking at the mirror? Are you actually somewhere behind all of that, observing the whole situation? Trying to work out where your genuine self lies. It was kind of a snapshot of how it felt to be in my body at that particular time, with all the pressures that are on everyone, and just existing or cultivating some kind of public persona. It's an ongoing debate in my head, with a lot of the same questions. You consider, and then reconsider...⁴¹

⁴⁰ Juzwiak, "SOPHIE."

⁴¹ Ravens, "bonnet."



Fig 14. and Fig 15. Frames from the “Faceshopping” music video, which depict animations of SOPHIE. As the track clanks and glitches onwards, animations slice, twist, expand and contract SOPHIE’s computer-generated profile.

Synthesizing Real(?) Sounds: The Music of SOPHIE

Latex gloves, smack so hard
PVC, I get so hard
Platform shoes, kick so hard...
Leatherette, party so hard...
Patent boot, yank so hard
Silicone, squeeze so hard...
Rubber doll, bang so hard...
In the club party so hard...
I just get so hard...

SOPHIE, “Hard,” from the compilation album *Product* ⁴²

Parse through the reviews of and features on SOPHIE’s music, and you’ll find countless attempts by critics and journalists to articulate the provocative, and *evocative*, sonic elements of SOPHIE’s production using the limited descriptors permitted by written language. When these publications are compared, a few commonalities emerge. First is the equation of SOPHIE’s sound design to particular tactile materials which exist in the real world (all of which are known to have distinct textures when touched, or distinct sounds when heard). Frequently referenced materials are “metallic” materials, “bubbles” or “bubbly” materials, “fizzy” materials, “melty” materials, “rubberized” materials, “stretched” or “elastic” materials, or objects that emit “high-pitched” or squeaky sounds (like a “chipmunk,” or “helium” as it exits a balloon).⁴³ Perhaps the most common material employed as a tactile parallel is latex. For instance, *DJ Magazine* said that SOPHIE’s sonic world evoked the image of a “latex-gloved hand,” and writer Sasha Geffen,

⁴² SOPHIE, “Hard,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-hard-lyrics>

⁴³ Anna Cafolla, “SOPHIE: Changing the narrative,” *DJ Magazine*, July 16, 2019, <https://djmag.com/longreads/sophie-changing-narrative>; Sasha Geffen, “Sophie Can Show You the World,” *Vulture*, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/01/profile-sophie.html>; Ravens, “bonnet.”; Sasha Geffen, “SOPHIE: OIL OF EVERY PEARL’S UN-INSIDES Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, June 15, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/sophie-oil-of-every-pearls-un-insides/>; Philip Sherburne, “PC Music’s Twisted Electronic Pop: A User’s Manual,” *Pitchfork*, September 17, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/485-pc-musics-twisted-electronic-pop-a-users-manual/>;

in their review of SOPHIE's debut album *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, depicted SOPHIE's music as both "latex-coated" and "latex-pop."⁴⁴ As Geffen brilliantly explicates in another feature published by *Vulture*, "[SOPHIE's] sound world is so visceral, tactile – you feel it like you feel your knees vibrating after you've launched a video game character into a massive jump. It's made from software, but it ripples through your body all the same."⁴⁵

In the few times SOPHIE delineated something akin to a creative process (SOPHIE often avoided the press early on, in an effort to let the music to speak for itself), the unparalleled sound designer was emphatic about the intended connection between the sounds which constitute a quintessential SOPHIE production, and the sounds SOPHIE experienced in day-to-day life. Early in their careers, PC Music founder A.G. Cook noted that, while he typically spent the majority of his production time working out chords and catchy melodies, and generally using simple sounds to do so, SOPHIE would "spend a lot of time doing sound design, trying to recreate real world sounds through synthesizers and stuff like that."⁴⁶ A later interview in *DJ Magazine* confirmed that SOPHIE often found "inspiration in the sounds of the natural world, before attempting to recreate them synthetically."⁴⁷ In that conversation, SOPHIE told a story of being inspired by the sound of a swing, which was supplemented by SOPHIE's former girlfriend, manager, and model Tzef Montana:

SOPHIE: I've been working on a song recently that's inspired by this swing I was on in Australia. It creaked a lot, and I could feel the resistance in my body with each swing. I couldn't stop thinking about the sound, so I went back with my machine and tried to synthesize the effect.

⁴⁴ Cafolla, "Changing.," Geffen, "Review."

⁴⁵ Geffen, "World."

⁴⁶ Vozick-Levinson, "Twisted."

⁴⁷ Cafolla, "Changing."

Tzef: We'll be at the beach just chilling out, and [SOPHIE] gets a stone, and throws it again and again, just to hear the 'plop.'⁴⁸

The “machine” SOPHIE referred to in this story is likely the Elektron Monomachine, a powerful digital synthesizer developed in the early 2000s and notable for its multiple modes of synthesis, as well as its complex sequencer.⁴⁹ During the artist’s brief time at university, SOPHIE studied sculpture. It is thus unsurprising that SOPHIE compared the Monomachine to a “bit of clay,” out of which SOPHIE could sculpt a short idea, before ultimately expanding and detailing the production in the computer using the digital audio workstation Ableton Live. Anna Cafolla, the interviewer for the *DJ Mag* feature, explains that SOPHIE “uses the Elektron Monomachine and Ableton Live to make music, building... instrumentals from waveforms, rather than traditional sampling, to form an expansive personal library. To [SOPHIE], it’s like sculpture, with all the materials, textures and forms at [SOPHIE’s] fingertips.”⁵⁰



Fig 16. The Elektron Monomachine. SOPHIE often incorporated “Monomachine freestyles” into live sets, during which the artist would generate sounds, sequences, and even full electronic instrumental compositions solely using this device.

⁴⁸ Cafolla, “Changing.”

⁴⁹ Elektron, “Legacy Products,” Elektron, <https://www.elektron.se/legacy-products/>

⁵⁰ Cafolla, “Changing.”



Fig 17. SOPHIE and Rihanna in the studio, experimenting with the Elektron Monomachine. Rihanna tweeted this photo of her and SOPHIE in the wake of SOPHIE's unexpected death. The tweet's caption read, "still can't believe this. Rest Peacefully Sophie..." No collaborations between the two artists have ever been released or leaked.⁵¹

It is in this way first that SOPHIE's production process is epitomized by the phrase "synthesize the real." Instead of utilizing the field recordings of everyday environments, events, or materials, SOPHIE chose to rely solely upon the process of electronic synthesis (as in the process of creating sounds using synthesizers) to construct uncanny emulations of those real world phenomena. As SOPHIE also illuminates in the *DJ Mag* interview, the multi-sensory experience of interacting with materials in the real world (like swinging on a swing) is of great importance to the artist. SOPHIE doesn't want sound design and music production to simply be heard, but to be *felt* in a multi-dimensional, real world sort of way (after all, when someone is

⁵¹ Rihanna, Twitter Post, February 1, 2021, 10:26 AM, <https://twitter.com/rihanna/status/1356262700637188099>

swinging on a swing, they don't have isolated perceptions of hearing, seeing, touching, or moving on that swing, but instead experience the assembled event that is swinging).

SOPHIE's production also prioritizes a multi-dimensional listening experience by representing and supporting lyrics through sound. In an interview with *The Face*, SOPHIE states, "I wanted to make what I was doing relevant to the lyrical content. I think there should be a synergy between the content and the sound design."⁵²

In the excerpts from the song "Hard" included at the beginning of this section, a digitally manipulated, high-pitched vocalist energetically rattles off the objects and materials that give them pleasure (get them "hard"), including "latex gloves" that "smack so hard," "silicone," which they "squeeze so hard," and a "rubber doll," which they "bang so hard."⁵³ Along with the utterance of the word "hard" (which generally occurs on the third beat of the 4/4 time signature), listeners can hear the sharp, metallic clang of SOPHIE's iconic snare drum, which also hits on the word "smack." Beneath the lyrics, "platform shoes, kick so hard," lurks a quick percussive sequence reminiscent of the click-clacking of heels on a solid floor, which leads into a metallic snare sound on the word "kick," as if someone in platform shoes had indeed wound up to kick you. Panned around the phrase about "PVC" is an astonishing sound effect akin to the thwacking of plastic-on-plastic. This brilliant sort of "text painting through sound design" on the track "Hard" occurs throughout SOPHIE's entire discography, and came to define the artist's acclaimed and idiosyncratic production style.

Three more ways in which SOPHIE ensured a multi-sensory experience of those synthesized materials were through representative artwork, an accompanying physical product, and live performance graphics. The single artwork for tracks like "Vyzee" and "Elle" depict

⁵² Ravens, "bonnet."

⁵³ SOPHIE, "Hard," *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-hard-lyrics>

plastic, toy slides which look like they were taken from a marble set. These visuals pair well with the warped synth sounds in both songs, which relentlessly bend up and down in pitch like electronic slide whistles, and evoke the experience of spiraling through a slide. Further, the purchase of the vinyl version of *Product* came with the aforementioned physical companion, a “skin safe, odorless, and tasteless platinum silicone product” which closely resembled a dildo, and thus commodified the song “Hard” with perfection.⁵⁴ Finally, live performances of the songs from *Product* were often accompanied by graphics as seen in Figure 21, which reads “POLYVINYL CHLORIDE” (PVC) in SOPHIE’s signature font.



Fig 18. and Fig 19. Artwork for the singles “Vyzee” and “Elle,” from SOPHIE compilation album *Product*.

⁵⁴ Gordon, “Sex Toy.”



Fig 20. The “product” which came with the physical release of SOPHIE’s compilation album *Product*. Due to its shape and silicone composition, many people believed that it looked like a sex toy.⁵⁵



Fig 21. The “POLYVIYNL CHLORIDE” graphic flashes behind SOPHIE during a live set. The font used is most commonly associated with the “SOPHIE” logo, as seen on the cover of the *Product* compilation album.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Gordon, “Sex Toy.”

⁵⁶ Vozick-Levinson, “Twisted.”

SOPHIE's synthesis of real world materials also evokes the phrase "synthesize the real" due to the *particular materials* SOPHIE chose to synthesize. In this section's opening paragraph, almost all of the objects and textures associated with SOPHIE's sound design are artificial, or manmade. The metallic snare drums, percussion, and arpeggiated synth stabs found in SOPHIE's music are far more reminiscent of the clanking of steel pipes, or wobbling of tin pans than any metal found in its natural or elemental form. Even the sonically bright bubbles or fizzy elements sound more like the foaming of a recently poured soft drink than the sound of any naturally occurring interaction between a liquid and a gas.

When asked by *Pitchfork* about the "melty, colorful" images associated with the *Product* era, SOPHIE defined the style of the artwork as "Homemade Molecular Cooking:"

Music as molecular gastronomy is something I like to think about. It's about getting to the molecular level of a particular sound – realizing what that sound actually is made of, and why it behaves a certain way when processed or cooked. Then, you use those molecules to build new forms, mixing and re-appropriating those raw materials – and of course, it should be bloody delicious.⁵⁷

The style of cooking to which SOPHIE's production process is compared is telling. Molecular gastronomy is cooking's version of "synthesizing the real," through which practitioners seek to "generate new knowledge on the basis of the chemistry and physics behind culinary processes – for example, why mayonnaise becomes firm, or why a soufflé swells."⁵⁸ In a statement posted on Instagram in the wake of SOPHIE's death, electronic music artist Jimmy Edgar reminisced about the time that SOPHIE took him to get "the most expensive sushi in LA,"

⁵⁷ Larry Fitzmaurice, "SOPHIE," *Pitchfork*, October 10, 2013, <https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/9237-sophie/>

⁵⁸ Nathan Myhvoid, "Molecular gastronomy," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/molecular-gastronomy>

and how they proceeded to “geek about all of the textures.”⁵⁹ I can only imagine what that sushi must have *sounded* like to SOPHIE.

“Real” Sounds, “Real” Identities: A Trans-Musical Philosophy

You could be me and, I could be you
Always the same and, never the same
Day by day, life after life

Without my legs or my hair
Without my genes or my blood
With no name and with no type of story
Where do I live?
Tell me, where do I exist?
We’re just...

Immaterial boys, immaterial girls...
I could be anything I want...

SOPHIE, “Immaterial,” from *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides* (CIT)

When asked if music was “an extension of the way you present your identity to the outside world,” SOPHIE replied, “Yeah, I think you touched on something really important here... That’s my chosen method of communication. I speak through my appearance a bit as well, but the medium I’m more experienced with is music.”⁶⁰ Overwhelmingly, SOPHIE’s “synthesize the real” approach to sound design and production worked to communicate on a musical level the PC Music consumerist aesthetics and philosophy of identity delineated in the first section of this paper.

To start, the artificial materials and textures which SOPHIE sought to emulate through synthesis, as well as evoke through lyrical content, were often embodied in SOPHIE’s outfits,

⁵⁹ Jimmy Edgar, *Instagram*, January 30, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKrV46Wgttw/>

⁶⁰ Juzwiak, “SOPHIE.”

visual aesthetics (logos, artwork, promotional materials, social media posts, etc.) and performances. For instance, the *DJ Magazine* feature on SOPHIE noted how, at a show the artist played at the London nightclub Fabric, SOPHIE was “flanked by dancers in latex and leather.”⁶¹ Indeed, most of SOPHIE’s live performance attire looked as if it mirrored the rubbery and latex sounds designed on SOPHIE’s coveted Elektron Monomachine.

Reflecting back on the images in this paper of SOPHIE’s interpretation of the outfit from Madonna’s “Material Girl” music video, the primary alteration made was the addition of elbow-high, black or red gloves which appear as though they consist of a synthetic, elastic material – possibly rubber, although most likely latex. At some live shows, SOPHIE took to the stage covered nearly head to toe in latex clothing, and sometimes appropriated the latex outfits of BDSM culture, especially during the performance of the sex positive, bondage-praising track “Ponyboy.” “Ponyboy” was released on SOPHIE’s debut album *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides*, the artwork of which displays SOPHIE in a dress made from a translucent plastic material, and long, skin-colored latex gloves.

By wearing the actual materials emulated by SOPHIE’s electronic synthesis, or through displaying “POLYVINYL CHLORIDE” on screen, stylized in the font most commonly associated with SOPHIE’s logo, the process of “synthesizing the real” as the phrase relates to SOPHIE’s tactile sound design is intertwined with “synthesizing the real” as it relates to the meticulous and deliberate construction of an identity by way of branding. In an interview for *Jezebel*, SOPHIE explains that experimentation with “electronic music and synthetic materials” has ultimately led to the discovery of an identity “that’s actually *more* real... That’s something I always want to try and communicate, deconstructing this idea of authenticity which you see so

⁶¹ Cafolla, “Changing.”

much in the music industry especially. An acoustic or electric guitar is meant to signify authenticity, but like, what's the real relationship? It's a symbol more than anything."⁶² This statement seems to supplement SOPHIE and A.G. Cook's earlier assertions in *Rolling Stone* that it is problematic to equate acoustic, or sonically "raw" music with authenticity, and electronic or "slickly produced" computer music with artifice.⁶³

Illuminating how SOPHIE's sound design and production processes are mirrored in SOPHIE's curated appearance and visual aesthetics helps us to better understand why SOPHIE would bring up persona or identity ("current images and people") in a response regarding the kind of musical challenge PC Music views as "valid," or as capable of authentication.⁶⁴ Fundamentally, SOPHIE's production ethos, and SOPHIE and PC Music's philosophy of identity are so intimately synonymous, as they both involve the process of achieving something more "real" through processes often read as "artificial" (electronic synthesis, and the deliberate process of branding oneself).

Perhaps the most high profile collision of SOPHIE's production and the aesthetics of consumerism occurred when SOPHIE's single "Lemonade" (from *Product*) was synced in a McDonald's advertisement for, unsurprisingly, their new lemonade.⁶⁵ The track could not have been a better fit for an ad which sought to manipulate viewers into craving a cold beverage on a hot summer day. Indeed, "Lemonade" as a stand-alone audio project comes impossibly close to sonically re-creating the experience of sipping on a soft drink. The song opens with SOPHIE's iconic, synthesized liquid-like sounds, which fizz into a sample of a person swishing a beverage

⁶² Hazel Cills, "SOPHIE Is an Immaterial Girl in a Material World," *Jezebel*, April 4, 2018, <https://themuse.jezebel.com/sophie-is-an-immaterial-girl-in-a-material-world-1823883163>

⁶³ Vozick-Levinson, "Twisted.,"; Dean Kissick, "A.G. Cook Dissolves Into the Light," *Interview*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/ag-cook-pc-music>

⁶⁴ Vozick-Levinson, "Twisted."

⁶⁵ Chal Ravens, "SOPHIE: Earthly Pleasures," *Crack Magazine*, May 1, 2018, <https://crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/sophie-earthly-pleasures/>

around in their mouth before exclaiming, “ahhh” (as in, “how refreshing”). The production then drops into a bouncy beat over which the vocalist chants, “Lemonade le- le- Lemonade,” in sync with the percussive bubble sounds. Later in the track, a high frequency synthesizer rises in pitch over and over again, as if emulating the sound of someone repeatedly sipping a drink through a straw.⁶⁶

In short, SOPHIE seemed to have made the advertising agency’s job quite easy: actors in the video are primarily seen sipping brightly colored, red and yellow lemonade through straws, or diving into a shockingly blue swimming pool (these shots also pair well with SOPHIE’s liquid-like sounds, as the production convincingly depicts both the liquid beverage, as well as the bubbles blown by the actors underwater). The voiceover in the ad is sparse, but among the few phrases said are, “real strawberries,” followed by, “real lemonade,” despite the fact that the shots of strawberries and lemonade are so digitally enhanced and color corrected that they rival the hyperreal portraits of PC Music artist Hannah Diamond.⁶⁷

Far more fascinating, however, is the striking similarity between the most successful commercial endeavor of SOPHIE’s career (the McDonald’s ad) and the music video for SOPHIE’s song “Faceshopping,” which, as previously detailed, uses sound design and lyrics to explore the artificial processes which aid in the construction of an authentic identity (hence lyrics like “artificial bloom,” “hydroponic skin” and, of course, “synthesize the real,” which pair unnatural and natural descriptors, objects, and processes).⁶⁸

⁶⁶ SOPHIE, “Lemonade,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-lemonade-lyrics>

⁶⁷ Sarah Kirkman, “McDonald’s: Lemonades,” YouTube video, 0:30, November 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTYITNM1K-s>

⁶⁸ SOPHIE, “Faceshopping,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-faceshopping-lyrics>



Fig 22. A frame from the McDonald's lemonade ad which featured the SOPHIE song "Lemonade." The "Real" in the image corresponds to when the voiceover says, "real strawberries."⁶⁹



Fig 23. A frame from SOPHIE's "Faceshopping" music video. The "Real" in this image corresponds to when the pitched-down vocal-bass grows the lyric, "my face is the real shop front."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Kirkman, "McDonald's."

⁷⁰ SOPHIE, "SOPHIE – Faceshopping (Official Video)," YouTube video, 4:08, April 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es9-P1SOeHU>

These frames from the McDonald's advertisement (Figure 22) and the "Faceshopping" music video (Figure 23) depict a shared, almost pop art aesthetic in which the word "real" is flashed over seemingly natural materials (the water-like liquid in both videos, as well as the additional fruit in the McDonald's ad) which have been so overtly processed that their initially perceived naturalness is called into question. Indeed, upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the liquid in the "Faceshopping" video is in fact computer-animated.⁷¹ This frame from the music video also puts on display the obvious appropriation of the exact typography and coloration of another iconic brand – Coca-Cola (once again, as Dan Weiss said of SOPHIE and PC Music in their early days, "Warhol would be proud").⁷²



Fig 24. The frame from the "Faceshopping" music video in which the Coca-Cola "Real" typography is presented over seemingly wet skin.⁷³

⁷¹ SOPHIE, "Faceshopping."

⁷² Weiss, "Trend."

⁷³ SOPHIE, "Faceshopping."

The next time the word “real” is spoken in the hook of “Faceshopping,” and thus simultaneously flashed upon the screen, we see the Coca-Cola typography laid over a different material – *skin* (Figure 24). In this sequence, which alternates rapidly between the “real skin” frame (Figure 24), the computer animations of SOPHIE’s face (Figures 14 and 15), and shots of miscellaneous beauty products, SOPHIE’s overtly presented fabrication of identity is once again linked to the process of developing a brand, akin to that of Coca-Cola, or McDonald’s.

The “Faceshopping” video takes advantage of the multi-sensory audio-visual capabilities of the music video form and, with sequences like these, is able to simultaneously connect (1) SOPHIE and PC Music’s consumerist visual aesthetics and exaggerated musical personae, (2) the collective’s commentary on the branding of all individual identities under neoliberal capitalism, and (3) SOPHIE’s electronic re-creation of artificially synthesized, yet real world objects and materials. In “Faceshopping,” listeners will hear lyrics like “I’m real when I shop my face” mixed among an abundance of rhythmic sound design which evokes the textures of metal (SOPHIE’s iconic metallic snare drums and percussion) as well as what sounds like the soft plastic vinyl used to make exercise balls (SOPHIE’s animated face expands, contracts, and wobbles as if it were a large bouncing ball which had been launched down a flight of stairs).

As SOPHIE has articulated, the song “Faceshopping” addresses both this broader experience of “cultivating some sort of public persona,” as well as depicts experiences specific to gender transition. Lyrics like “chemical release” allude to the emotional and physical rush felt as a result of hormone therapies; the depictions of plastic surgery and the transformation of SOPHIE’s face both as presented in the lyrics (“Scalpel, lipstick, gel/Action, camera, lights”) and in the accompanying music video are reminiscent of medical procedures like facial feminization surgery; Lyrics like “Positive results” and “Documents of life” (as in legal

documentation which displays one's preferred gender identity) imply success in the attainment of a desired identity (perhaps we can interpret these "documents of life" as both a material representation of the new life, or identity, SOPHIE has created, as well as documents which, when correct, are psychologically and spiritually *life-giving*).⁷⁴

In 2018, following the release of *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, SOPHIE was interviewed by then girlfriend Tzef Montana for a *Paper Magazine* cover story in which SOPHIE discussed being transgender in detail for the first time. When Montana asked, "what is transness to you?" SOPHIE replied, "For me, transness is taking control to bring your body more in line with your soul and spirit so the two aren't fighting against each other and struggling to survive."⁷⁵ When asked about hormones, SOPHIE says:

The emotional effects – for me, it feels like you're more in control or aware of sexual urges. You're not being led by a force you don't understand that's kind of distorting your senses of what having a good life feels like. And when you take hormones, you can just be aware that there are these different control systems inside of me, and I want to take control of these things and try to find a balance for me that works – that feels good. That allows me to close things off and be myself – to look at the world in the way I want to see it.⁷⁶

To SOPHIE, a full "embrace of the essential idea of transness" implies the acquisition of *agency* – the ability to "take control" of one's own body and one's own life, to explore one's internal "control systems" and ultimately settle into configurations which "feel good." All of these actions imply the deliberate construction of self, the meticulous probing of the physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual facets of one's own identity. In the aforementioned interview for *Jezebel* regarding the "artificial" processes which have ultimately contributed to a more authentic

⁷⁴ SOPHIE, "Faceshopping," *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-faceshopping-lyrics>

⁷⁵ Justin Moran, "SOPHIE's Whole New World," *Paper*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.papermag.com/sophie-pride-2579165152.html>

⁷⁶ Moran, "World."

identity, SOPHIE actually begins the conversation by discussing “body augmentation,” and then equates those medical procedures to electronic synthesis and SOPHIE’s love of synthetic materials. The un-edited quotation begins as such: “[With] things like body augmentation, you can find something that’s actually *more* real, which is my experience with electronic music and synthetic materials...”⁷⁷

It is in this way that SOPHIE’s understanding and articulation of gender identity are perfectly epitomized by the phrase “synthesize the real.” Undergoing plastic surgery is already heavily stereotyped as an unnecessary, artificial, and thus inauthentic pursuit (these stereotypes are, of course, *incredibly* gendered). Add to the reasons for that plastic surgery or hormone therapy the overarching goal of gender transition, and one may very well encounter the bigotry of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (“TERFS,” as they deserve to be called with disdain) who continue to espouse the non-sensical belief that sex is biologically determined at birth, or that sex is divinely predestined, etc., and therefore one cannot possibly become the sex or gender they desire, or come to experience womanhood, by way of transitioning. What SOPHIE, and countless trans people before SOPHIE, suggest is, of course, the complete opposite, which is that the deliberate manipulation and augmentation of the body serves as a way to finally come into contact with one’s authentic self (in SOPHIE’s words, “bring your body more in line with your soul and spirit”). In this way, SOPHIE’s conception of transgender identity is one in which trans people synthesize a far more real identity, which, as SOPHIE explains, is no longer dictated by “the body you were born into.”⁷⁸

As the first section of this essay explicates, SOPHIE and the broader PC Music collective believe that everyone “synthesizes the real,” meaning that everyone to some extent engages in

⁷⁷ Cills, “Immaterial.”

⁷⁸ Moran, “World.”

the processes of branding themselves and fabricating what they present to the world to be a real, or authentic, identity. Therefore, the embrace of consumerist or other stereotypically inauthentic aesthetics, or the enthusiastic engagement in a process like branding, or the creation of “bright... engaging,” “mainstream” sounding electro-pop should not render an identity inauthentic, as branding and fabrication lie at the core of all identities, which differ more in “packaging” than they do in their core constitutions (recall A.G. Cook’s assertion that Adele and Lady Gaga are both in essence brands which contain the same ambiguous swirl of “real and fake”).⁷⁹

PC Music’s rather positive conception of the deliberate fabrication of identity bears a striking resemblance to SOPHIE’s commentary on gender and transness, in which SOPHIE asserts that meticulous self-curation and augmentation can result in the achievement of a self which feels far more authentic than the supposedly “natural” identity a person is assigned at birth. Perhaps this is why both of these manifestations of the phrase “synthesize the real” are communicated so effectively in the song “Faceshopping.” When asked what was meant by the word “real” in the lyric, “I’m real when I shop my face,” SOPHIE responded, “I’m real when I shop my face... What *is* real? Being trans.”⁸⁰

In general, SOPHIE saw the three ways in which this paper has defined the phrase “synthesize the real” (in the contexts of overall identity, sound design and production, and gender identity) to be constantly in dialogue with, and informing one another. In an interview with *Vulture*, SOPHIE explained that, “there’s a running theme in this music – questioning preconceptions about what’s real and authentic... what’s natural and what’s unnatural and what’s artificial, in terms of music, in terms of gender, in terms of reality, I suppose”.⁸¹ Additionally,

⁷⁹ Vozick-Levinson, “Twisted.”; Curto, “Cook.”

⁸⁰ Juzwiak, “SOPHIE.”

⁸¹ Geffen, “World.”

SOPHIE has explicitly stated, “I try to talk about [being trans] through my music.”⁸² These comments prompt the brief exploration of one final question – *can music be trans?*

In the wake of SOPHIE’s tragic death following an accidental fall in Athens, Greece, a wave of countless griever, from fans, to journalists, to mega-producers and pop superstars, published their shock-incited obituaries, their celebrations of SOPHIE’s impact on music and culture, and their simple yet gut-wrenching “I’ll miss you” statements on just about every platform possible, from anonymous YouTube comments left beneath old concert footage, to lengthy features in the *New York Times* and *Pitchfork*. Many of the reflection pieces published on major news, music, and culture platforms were written by trans and gender-nonconforming individuals, all of whom emphatically noted the ways in which they felt like SOPHIE’s music sounded trans, or embodied the trans experience.

In an article published by *MTV*, journalist Coco Romack (who wrote a cover story on SOPHIE for *Out Magazine* in 2018) claimed,

But for those who listened closely, or perhaps those who were always meant to hear, SOPHIE’s music sounded trans all along. I began taking estrogen and testosterone blockers a little over a year after our interview, and if my own experience has taught me anything, it’s that transition, despite what some simplified media narrative might have you believe, is often not about the here or there, the before or after, but the messy process of becoming, the generative possibilities that exist in the ability to alter your physical self to match your essence, and the changing relationship to the body that inevitably comes with it. I heard that potential in the yearning lyrics of “Immaterial,” the gummy clanking of “MSMSMSM,” the cyborg erection described in “Hard.” “Faceshopping” to be sure, was for the girls. SOPHIE was a self-taught musician, yet she built her own universe from digital particles, a “whole new world,” as one track hinted by repurposing the theme from Disney’s animated *Aladdin*. I think that’s what SOPHIE meant when SOPHIE told *Paper* that “God is trans.”⁸³

⁸² Juzwiak, “SOPHIE.”

⁸³ Coco Romack, “SOPHIE is gone but left behind a Whole New World,” *MTV*, February 1, 2021, <http://www.mtv.com/news/3173902/sophie-gone-whole-new-world/#:~:text=After%20a%20tragic%20accident%20in,at%20the%20age%20of%2034.>

In a feature for *The Guardian*, critic Jessica Dunn Rovinelli stated,

Long before... SOPHIE's 2017 track and video "It's Okay to Cry" were released – an image of SOPHIE's transgender body in joyful, anxious, and deeply felt flux – this artist was already special to trans people. SOPHIE had long crafted electronic dance tracks that freed femininity and bodies from their usual contexts and let them dance with abandon. In 2013, it didn't matter to me, as a not-yet-out-even-to-myself transgender woman, whether or not SOPHIE was transgender. What mattered was that in early singles, such as the genre-defining "Bipp" that year, we felt as though we could become something else.... In these oh-so-fake but oh-so-physical sounds, I found a place I could exist. It didn't matter if I was a "real woman" to myself or others, what mattered was that these textures were a space I could make my own, where that helium voice, in all its processed trickery, could be mine. Sophie molded raw sound to make hyperreal versions of recognizable forms – which felt more "real" than any sample. Transgender people in particular exist through self-processing: we make a body that we can live in and a world where that body can feel safe. Sophie's music does that work for us, with us. We contort alongside SOPHIE's sounds, our bodies mirror the music, the tools of audio processing mirror our tools for body processing.⁸⁴

In a personal reflection piece for *them.*, writer Hannah Jocelyn wrote,

After the artist's passing, critic and *Glitter Up the Dark* author Sasha Geffen tweeted that SOPHIE favored the "direct communication of complex interior experience" over explicit identifiers in manicured social media posts. Instead, SOPHIE just trusted that the message would reach the people that needed it most. In speaking with a handful of [transgender and gender non-conforming] friends when formulating this article, including music producers, many said that they already felt a connection to the way SOPHIE distorted sounds – long before realizing that neither they nor their inspiration were cis[gender]. The way SOPHIE manipulated pitch felt like a way to escape dysphoria and explore identity... [SOPHIE] created a body of work that frantically tore apart sound and gender, where enhancement and exaggeration created the most authentic presentation.⁸⁵

Lastly, Janus Rose, a senior editor at *Vice Media*, proclaimed,

It was through SOPHIE's music that I began to see my own transness as a kind of beautiful cyborg divinity. I listened to "Faceshopping" constantly in the weeks, days, and hours before finally having facial feminization surgery in late September... SOPHIE headlined one of the last live shows I saw before the pandemic – a late-night DJ set closing out Unsound Festival in November of 2019. I remember leaving early with my then-girlfriend, both of us exhausted and assured that we would get a chance to see the enigmatic pop star perform again, When the news of SOPHIE's passing hit our phones,

⁸⁴ Jessica Dunn Rovinelli, "Sophie's triumphantly plastic music molded a new world for trans people," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/feb/02/sophie-triumphantly-plastic-music-moulded-a-new-world-for-trans-people>

⁸⁵ Hannah Jocelyn, "SOPHIE Showed Us the Way," *them.*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.them.us/story/sophie-showed-us-the-way>

the weight of losing one of the few trans musicians who had ascended to mainstream success crushed us. But within that sadness was a profound gratitude for having briefly visited this fey-like being. With music that oscillates between otherworldly ambience, grating noise, and every alien tonality in between, SOPHIE seemed to speak directly to the messy and inarticulate beauty within ourselves. For myself and countless other trans people who still resonate with the divinity, it's an encounter we will not soon forget.⁸⁶

All of these passionate excerpts assert that SOPHIE's "synthesize the real" approach to sound design and production powerfully embodied and communicated the "synthesize the real" experiences of gender transition. Coco Romack equates the "generative possibilities that exist in the ability to alter your physical self to match your essence" with SOPHIE's generative synthesis techniques. Jessica Dunn Rovinelli maps her experience of "body processing" onto SOPHIE's "audio processing," and therefore perceives SOPHIE's music as uniquely designed to mirror the transgender body. Janus Rose draws connections between the lyrical content of "Faceshopping" and her own experience with facial feminization surgery. Hannah Jocelyn identifies the ways in which SOPHIE's music calls into question the naturalness of gender by presenting "enhancement" and "exaggeration" as ways of creating "the most authentic presentation."

Another facet of SOPHIE's production noted in these articles was SOPHIE's extreme processing and pitching of the human voice. In the initial reviews of and features on PC Music, the collective's quintessentially high-pitched and overtly feminine vocals were often one of critics' least favorite elements of the PC Music sound. Perhaps the most scathing assessment of SOPHIE and PC Music was an article published in *The Fader* entitled, "Feminine Appropriation Was 2014's Biggest Electronic Music Trend." A particularly intense excerpt reads: "by appropriating and objectifying stereotypically feminine identities while obscuring their own, the men of PC Music and SOPHIE are literally colonizing the female body and using it as an

⁸⁶ Janus Rose, "Sophie Showed Me The Cybernetic Divinity of Being Trans," *Vice*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7akd8/sophie-showed-me-the-cybernetic-divinity-of-being-trans>

instrument for projecting their own agenda.”⁸⁷ In 2014, SOPHIE had not yet come out as trans, but excerpts like this still read like the comments repeatedly made by TERFs throughout the history of feminism, from Germaine Greer to the newly vocal transgender-hater J.K. Rowling. As I was personally grieving the loss of SOPHIE, it was exciting for me to read comments from fans and artists who also viewed SOPHIE’s pitched-up vocal processing not as a colonization, but as a momentary, computer empowered *transition* of the voice – a transition which, much like SOPHIE’s methodology for synthesis, relied upon technology in order to create something not only close to, but slightly beyond, reality. As Jessica Dunn Rovinelli summarizes, “in these oh-so-fake but oh-so-physical sounds, I found a place I could exist.”⁸⁸

The album *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides* constructs a peculiar narrative arc. On early songs like “Faceshopping” and “Is It Cold In The Water?” SOPHIE takes the listener through the life events and internal dialogues which constitute a transition, a transformation into a new self, which SOPHIE gets to know on the track “Infatuation” (the lyrics of which are, “Infatuation... who are you, deep down? I wanna know”).⁸⁹ However, the record ultimately crescendos into the pop anthem “Immaterial,” the lyrics of which were quoted at the beginning of this section. Although SOPHIE spends much of this album experimenting with, growing into, and deliberately constructing a desired identity, the artist ultimately comes to the conclusion that perhaps material gender is a failure, and that we’re all just “immaterial boys” and “immaterial girls” who can “be anything we want.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ The Fader, “Feminine Appropriation Was 2014’s Biggest Electronic Music Trend,” *The Fader*, 2014, <https://www.thefader.com/2014/12/31/feminine-appropriation-2014-electronic-music-trend>

⁸⁸ Rovinelli, “plastic.”

⁸⁹ SOPHIE, “Infatuation,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-infatuation-lyrics>

⁹⁰ SOPHIE, “Immaterial,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-immaterial-lyrics>

The sentiments regarding gender and identity expressed in SOPHIE's "Immaterial" parallel commentary put forth by a newer generation of trans theorists and writers like the author and critic Andrea Long Chu. In her *New York Times* opinion piece provocatively entitled "My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy," Chu delineates the issues with the increasingly mainstream and monolithic narrative that trans people should have access to the various ways of medically transitioning primarily because they are suffering, and thus need to be cured of that pain (which ultimately allows medical professionals to reject patients who they do not view as "in need" of their care). Chu boldly claims that her impending vaginoplasty won't necessarily make her happy and, most importantly, "it shouldn't have to," because she desires the procedure despite the challenges it will introduce.⁹¹ In summary, trans people should be afforded all the care they *need*, and all the care they *want*.

In the bridge section of the track "Immaterial," SOPHIE's lyrics read as liberated, as vocalist and collaborator Cecile Believe emphatically sings, "I don't even have to explain/Just leave me alone now/I can't be held down," before shifting back into the chorus chant, "Immaterial girls, immaterial boys/I could be anything I want... Anyhow, any place, anywhere, anyone/Any form, any shape, anyway, anything, anything I want..." In this moment, the lyrics depict an artist wholeheartedly pursuing their *desires*, as opposed to feeling as though they have to articulate a particular narrative, or define a particular identity in order to be perceived as real or valid. The process of synthesizing the real, in all definition of that phrase, results in the self-awareness, empowerment, and agency necessary to self-construct into anything you want.

⁹¹ Andrea Long Chu, "My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html>

Conclusion

I looked into your eyes
I thought that I could see a whole new world...

SOPHIE, “Whole New World/Pretend World,” from
Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides ⁹²

As the Covid-19 pandemic raged on throughout the Summer of 2020, I found myself isolated in my place of youth – the rural, mountainous state of Vermont. While at home, I remembered that, when asked in an interview with *Metal*, “do you have a favorite place or context in which you’d like your music to be heard?” SOPHIE responded, “I like listening [while] driving around... It’s awesome.” ⁹³ Since, for the first time in years, I had immediate access to a car, I decided to indulge in the pleasures of blasting electronic music through the tired speakers I had blown out way back in high school, while partaking in the same activity.

As I had done many times since its release in 2018, I returned to SOPHIE’s debut album (now, unbearably, SOPHIE’s only album) *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides*. In doing so, I sought inspiration for my own sound design and production. I also sought the euphoria and the emotional rejuvenation I have always felt while listening to my favorite sound designer, ever since I heard SOPHIE’s breakthrough single “Bipp” (from the *Product* compilation album), the lyrics of which read: “However you’re feeling/Whatever you feel inside/I can make you feel better/If you let me.” ⁹⁴

With an intense desire to somehow cram myself through the car’s aux cord and into the magical chaos that is the bridge section of “Faceshopping” (I argue that this is undeniably the

⁹² SOPHIE, “Whole New World/Pretend World,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-whole-new-world-pretend-world-lyrics>

⁹³ Marjolijn Oostermeijer, “Sophie – Trans is Inclusive,” *Metal*, June 28, 2018, <https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/sophie-trans-is-inclusive>

⁹⁴ SOPHIE, “Bipp,” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-bipp-lyrics>

best moment on the record), I found myself for the millionth time gasping at every little articulation and quasi-operatic vocal run performed by Cecile Believe, who serves as a co-writer and the album's principal vocalist. In what is seemingly the least processed vocal section in "Faceshopping," Cecile imperfectly croons the lyrics:

So, you must be the one
That I've seen in my dreams
Come on, touch me
Set my spirit free...
Do you feel what I feel?
Do you see what I see?
Oh, reduce me to nothingness
Yes, yes...⁹⁵

I remembered the overpowering experience of hearing this section for the first time, when a voice inside of me seemingly replied, "Yes! I think I do feel what you feel! I think I do see what you see! Please, reduce me to nothingness, and teach me how to build something new in my place... Yes, *YES!*"

Like the countless others who have spent much of 2021 mourning the loss of our favorite musician, I have been reflecting upon the ways in which SOPHIE's music, performances, and beautifully constructed identity have aided in my own pursuit of "synthesizing the real." As someone who has experienced an intense and lifelong disdain for and discomfort with nearly all of the masculine-coded properties of my voice and appearance, I was motivated for the first time in my life to sing confidently upon hearing those incredible, pitched-up, yet utterly sincere vocals in SOPHIE's music. While recording at home during the pandemic, I was asked by a family member why I wouldn't use my "real singing voice" in the songs I was making (as opposed to my "synthesized" voice, which is pitched-up four to six semitones, with the "formants" knob in

⁹⁵ SOPHIE, "Faceshopping," *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-faceshopping-lyrics>

Ableton Live's sample editor adjusted to around 50% so that I don't sound completely like Alvin, Simon, or Theodore). I wanted so badly to reply, "this *is* my real singing voice."

The final song on *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides* is entitled "Whole New World/Pretend Word." Of all the tracks on the album, it is the one I listen to least, as it is a sonically abrasive, nine minute journey through what is perhaps one of the loudest, most relentless and all around challenging productions of SOPHIE's discography. However, immediately upon learning of SOPHIE's death, I listened through the record once again, and this time I decided that it would be immoral to skip a song. As a result, my new favorite lyrics from this epic piece of music are:

Visions in my head
Visions of you and me, we're in love...

Promises
Promises might come true
Promises of a life uncontained
Seafoam blue...

Progress
Pushing through the mold
Tracing with my fingers, waking up
Wanting growth...

I looked into your eyes
I thought that I could see a whole new world... ⁹⁶

This time around, my newly read (or, newly and unjustifiably pretentious?) queer little mind drew connections between the "promises" of transition and transformation ingrained in the sounds and lyrics of SOPHIE's music, and the sentiments expressed by some of my favorite queer thinkers. SOPHIE's philosophy for a "Whole New World" shares similarity with Foucault's assertion that the real "danger" perceived in the full acceptance of queer people into society would not simply be the acceptance of queer sex acts, but instead the permittance of

⁹⁶ SOPHIE, "Whole New World/Pretend World," *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Sophie-whole-new-world-pretend-world-lyrics>

entirely new modes of living, of antinormative kinship formations which might threaten the performed naturalness and authority of heterosexuality.⁹⁷

It is vital to imagine new ways of imagining and articulating the relationships between our bodies, our desires, ourselves, and the others with whom we interact, and through whom we come to learn about ourselves. As SOPHIE so impressively suggested through music and through performance, perhaps those new modes of articulation must continue to transcend the limitations of spoken and written language, as they were articulated by Judith Butler in quintessential essays like “Against Proper Objects” and “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.”⁹⁸ I have the deepest affection for SOPHIE not only because I *see* myself in those (im)material girl dresses and gloves (they are indeed the ones “that I’ve seen in my dreams”), but due to the fact that through SOPHIE’s music I can *hear* myself, *sense* myself, *experience* myself multi-dimensionally, free from the pressures of having to explain myself in words. In an interview for *Jezebel*, SOPHIE was asked, “because you express yourself so much in your music, does talking about it in an interview like this one feel redundant?” SOPHIE replied, “I’m enjoying talking to you now. It’s fascinating to talk about this stuff, but it’s more fun to dance.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Michael Foucault, “Friendship as a way of life,” in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One – Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Ed. Paul Rainbow, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 135 – 140.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Ed. Henry Ablelove, Michèle Aina Barale, David M. Halperin, (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 307 – 320; Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects. *Introduction*,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2+3, 1994.

⁹⁹ Juzwiak, “SOPHIE.”

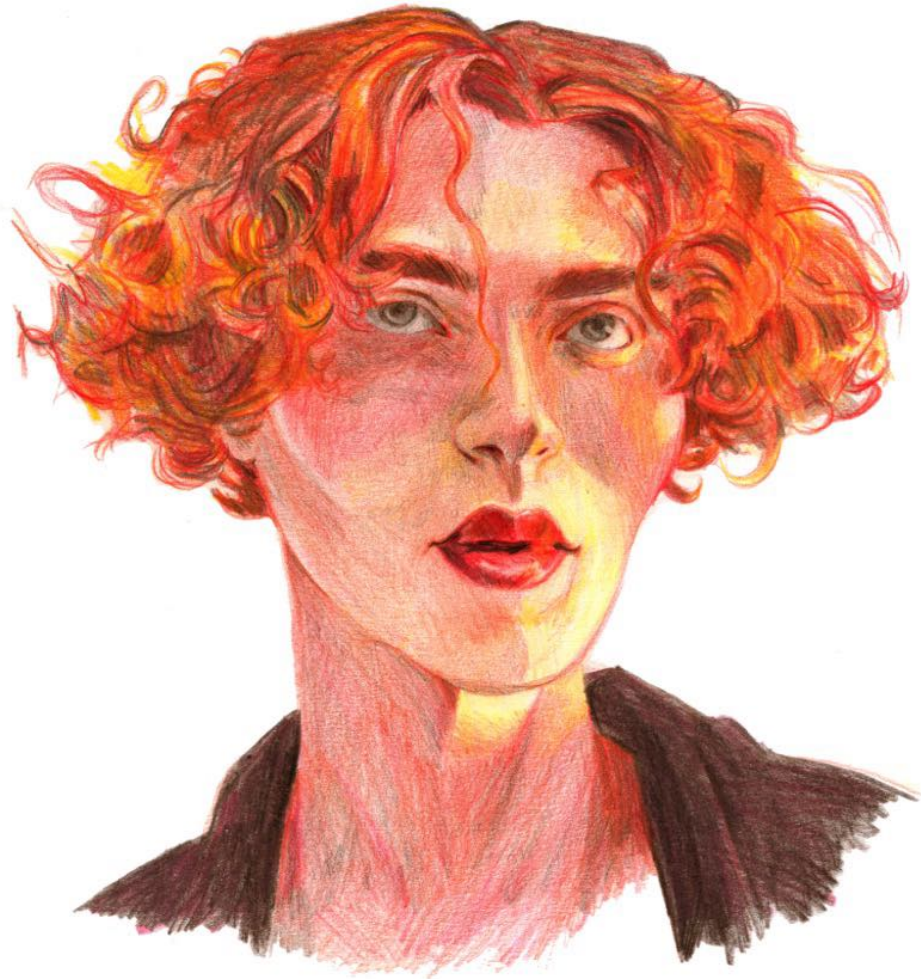


Fig 25. SOPHIE.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Illustration by Lily Porter Wright.