Review: Jake Elwes, *The Zizi Show – A Deepfake Drag Cabaret* (Edinburgh: The New Real, Edinburgh Futures Institute, 2020)

Owen G. Parry

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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> Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made and unmade.
> – Donna Haraway, A *Cyborg Manifesto*, 1984.

> Life and death become luxurious, for those of us who fight for it.
> – Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, *Theory from the Margins*, 2021.

The Zizi Show – A Deepfake Drag Cabaret (2020) is a virtual online interactive artwork combining Artificial Intelligence (AI) and drag performance.[1] It was created by the British visual artist Jake Elwes with thirteen established, UK-based drag artists, kings, queens, and 'everyone beyond the binary', and with support from the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

'Deepfake', a portmanteau of deep learning or machine learning and 'fake', was popularized in 2018 when a modified video was circulated on social media of Barack Obama mouthing words contained in a separate audio track that appeared deceivingly like the ex-president of the United States' own words. In our present age of Covid-19 conspiracy theories, fake news, and celebrity revenge porn, deepfakes are ranked as a 'serious AI crime threat' and 'a threat to democracy'.[2]

In Elwes' compelling artwork, however, deepfake deception is connected more affirmatively to deception's age-old emergence as entertainment in the decadent cabarets of the Weimar Republic and more recently the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present). While demonstrating the ability of AI to entertain the masses like cabaret, *The Zizi Show* also unleashes its potential as a radical pedagogic tool to educate on pressing contemporary concerns including the serious issue of human bias in AI, where variables such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual identity are often excluded. Such 'algorithmic bias' and 'discriminatory design'[3] perpetuate forms of

inequality tethered to the human world. Elwes' *The Zizi Show* calls for an eradication of such bias by demystifying AI and machine learning: taking it from the Silicon Valley elite and connecting it to the popular form of drag cabaret.

Access to this virtual performance requires a computer, laptop, or smartphone. On opening the webpage, one first encounters the prompt 'Enter *The Zizi Show*' in a snazzy decorative font. On clicking the viewer is immediately taken to a video in which a voiceover announces, 'Welcome to the stage, our host for the evening, the world's first deepfake drag act – Zizi.' As our host steps onto the stage, a familiar showtune begins to play – 'Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome' from John Kander's 1966 musical *Cabaret,* based on Christopher Isherwood's gloriously decadent *Berlin Stories* (1945).[4] In accordance with popular cabaret formats, there is a requirement to 'join in' or 'play along' with this automated show, which, because I am watching it on a laptop alone at home at 9.30 in the morning, feels a little silly or embarrassing. The stirring of such feelings, however, is key in reminding us that our very humanness as pleasure-mongering sentient beings is what is at stake in this artwork, in the history of cabaret, and if at all worth pursuing – in the future of AI too.

The host, Zizi, a shimmering translucent digital figurine*,* crosses to take centre stage, re/dis/appearing or rather morphing to the lip-sync 'Im cabaret, au cabaret, to cabaret!'. Zizi is difficult – impossible even – to identify in terms of gender, ethnicity or sexuality, and that is the point. As the figure's face and body mutate across multiple incarnations, we are reminded of the fluidity and multiplicity of identity – especially in the digital age where drag performance and avatar play have become ubiquitous forms of selfie-presentation online. While our host continually transmutes, what remains constant, familiar, and legible in this performance, is its framing as a decadent drag cabaret.

In the frame decadence constitutes a digital rendering of a classic red velvet curtain and black linoleum stage containing marks or footprints reminding us that many have trod these boards before, and that drag performance, and indeed deepfake cabaret, might trace their footprints back

to Ancient Greece, where for Plato theatre was, of course, philosophically undesirable – it was simply a lie. The choreography also identifies this performance as a short-form cabaret act. Zizi takes a few steps forward and one step back, creeps and repeats and turns, arms open to *Willkommen* us, acknowledging that this performance is for an audience (real or imagined) and an invitation to look and admire.

Speed, rhythm, and movement, synchronize with the musical backing track, keeping our attention on this (not so) solitary figure. And while remnants of flamboyant costume, feather boas, sequins, contour cleavage, thickly-caked makeup moustaches and lashes tell us that this is a drag show, these representations nevertheless crack and flicker before our very eyes. Like a flame they ignite memories of the bodily senses, reminding us of human passions and textures: the feeling and smell of warm plump bodies squeezed into synthetic fabrics, and greasy makeup on spotlit skin. The sound and hum of an imagined auditorium beckons: a recording of dispersed chatter, glasses clinking, gasps, claps, and cheers help create an illusion of cosmopolitan sociality: an ambience absent from the present pandemic. The lockdown launch of this artwork couldn't be more timely.

Following Zizi's opening performance, viewers are invited to 'pick a performer' from a menu of UK drag artists including Oedipussi Rex, Chiyo, Bolly-Illusion, and Ruby Wednesday, among others. After selecting a performer as one would in a computer game, the viewer is then invited to 'pick an act' from a menu of songs such as 'This is My Life' by Shirley Bassey, 'Freedom' by George Michael, 'I am What I Am' from La Cage Aux Folles, and more. Slightly distinct from Zizi's introductory performance, where our host continually morphs across multiple performers and identities, when viewers pick a drag performer and an act the performer remains singular and identifiable. The movement of the performer's body and lips matches (or rather approximates) the selected act, many of which were choreographed by the performers themselves and were fed into the programme's algorithm – an uneasy feast for an AI to digest, perhaps, given that the lip-sync rarely matches the song with any accuracy. Note: this is not a flaw. In fact, such performative

failure is a well-honed technique in drag performance and queer campery. It is the failure of virtuosity in drag performance that is so often compelling and entertaining. Algorithmic malfunction is comparable but decisively not the point here, but neither is *The Zizi Show* another rumination on the 'queer art of failure',[5] a subject given significant attention in scholarship on avant-garde art and theatre across the past decade or so. It is definitively more affirmative.

From listening to some accompanying lectures by Elwes on *The Zizi Project* – a larger project connected to this artwork on 'queering the dataset' – I learn that Elwes has fed the AI thousands of videos of drag performers garnered from the internet, all of which influence the creation of Zizi.[6] This inclusion of non-normative decadent subjectivities does the job of queering a would-be hegemonic dataset. Without a fixed or originary referent for Zizi, there is no gender to undo and no failure to be had. Thus, what distinguishes *The Zizi Show* from early explorations of drag and queer performance is the fact that drag here is not iterative, imitative, or parodic in the Butlerian sense of gender performance. That would rely on fixed gender binaries for drag to do the work of 'doubling' or 'undoing'. Rather, drag, in *The Zizi Show*, is generative, multiplicitous, and expansive. Zizi is a glittering example of non-binary diva allyship – as much an exemplary queering of gender and identity as it is a call to 'queer the dataset' of all discriminatory binaries and hierarchies.

Elwes' creative research is part of a momentous movement in queer, feminist, and decolonial scholarship at present focused on counteracting 'discriminatory design' in AI, such as the work of authors, artists, and activists including Ruha Benjamin, Joy Buolamwini, Safiya Umoja, Virginia Eubanks, Zach Blas, and Cathy O'Neil. What is so impressive about Elwes' *The Zizi Show* is the way that flamboyant drag performance is harnessed once again as a mainstay for progressive movements. Lest we forget, it was drag queens like Marsha P. Johnson who instigated the Stonewall uprising in the summer of 1969 that led to the Gay Liberation Movement. As AI is increasingly incorporated into our day-to-day lives, Zizi represents a potentially new icon of liberty and democracy for our time.

In some ways *The Zizi Show* still feels like a prototype for a future AI artwork that will undoubtedly manage to fully immerse spectators in a virtual cabaret experience by generating algorithms that respond to spectators and that will automatically spawn those bodily senses, textures, and smells that are so sensuous and pertinent to the experience of cabaret. As a rehearsal for a future not quite here yet, this virtual artwork also seems to echo the notion that, in José Esteban Muñoz's memorable words, 'Queerness is not yet here.' In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Muñoz writes, 'we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.'[7] *The Zizi Show* is an enticing experiment which enacts this queer potentiality in drag performance, and indeed AI, to influence, to educate, and to entertain. As new datasets produce new synthetic worlds, Elwes' contribution is an illuminating call for the inclusion of the spectacular body, idiosyncrasy, difference and all the sensual promises they afford.

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[1] <https://zizi.ai/> [accessed 12 August 2021].

[2] M. Caldwell, J. T. A. Andrews, T. Tanay and L. D. Griffin, 'AI-enabled future crime', *Crime Science*, 9.14 (2020), no pagination, <https://crimesciencejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40163-020-00123-8> [accessed 13 December 2021].

[3] See Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

[4] See Laurence Senelick, 'The Mythical Decadence of Weimar Cabaret', Staging Decadence Blog, <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/the-mythical-decadence-of-weimar-cabaret> [accessed 18 August 2021].

[5] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[6] See Jake Elwes, 'Making of The Zizi Show', online video recording, YouTube, 7 June 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c5-ABUkI_M&t=31s> [accessed 18 August 2021].

[7] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 1.