

**DECENTERING THE HUMAN
IN CONTEMPORARY ART**

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INTRODUCTION

Merriam-Webster defines technology as “the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area.” Our modern perception of technology, however, is arguably derived from the development of computer technology. When the first “personal computer” was introduced to the world in the 1970s, who would have thought that that we would progress to an age where motherboards and hard drives are integrated into our daily lives? Technology introduces a variable to humanity that makes the future even more unpredictable. The plethora of opportunities that arise from daily innovations in technology make it nearly impossible to remain up-to-date. With every step toward newer technology, older technology becomes obsolete. It is difficult to graph the trajectory of technological innovation in the long-term future, yet there are many who try. The unpredictability of the future presented by technology acts as a force of inspiration to envision and maybe even actualize the future of humans with technology.

The desire to envision our technological future is perhaps best portrayed through film. For instance, the American film, *The Matrix* (1999), visualizes a future when computers develop the capacity to run a simulation with humans as its subjects. The fundamental theme inherent in *The Matrix* is fear of artificial intelligence (AI) and the possibility that it will grow to the point where it poses a threat to humanity. The film—made twenty years ago—imagines the ontological entity (AI) as the antithesis to humanity. *The Matrix* was one out of many films that imagined future realities. A handful of Hollywood films including *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *i,Robot* (2004), and *ExMachina* (2014) have also included hyper-advanced machines that manipulate or challenge humanity. More recently, *Black Mirror* (2011 – present), the infamous Netflix series, explores the relationship we have with technology. Some episodes feature dystopian-like scenarios where new technology completely dominates human experiences (“Nosedive”), whereas other scenarios treat

technology as a method of attaining utopia (“San Junipero”).¹ Evidently, our relationship and our future relationship with technology is explored through film and television.

It would not be far from the truth to propose that these imagined futures are somewhat already here. Our current relationship with technology is far more advanced and complex than it was just ten years ago. Despite the message of *The Matrix*, which seems to warn us of a possible future driven by AI, scientists are still developing AI technologies that aim to make our lives easier. Both Google and Amazon incorporated AI into their most recent speakers, that upon listening to demands, adapt to the ways we live through patterns and algorithms.² These assistant speakers have names as well, “Google” and “Alexa,” respectively. Other companies follow in Google and Amazon’s footsteps. Bank of America released “Erica” in 2017, another AI assistant that responds to questions about banking. We have not yet come to the milestone of developing Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which is “full” or “strong” AI.³ AGI is often the technology that is referenced in popular culture: when robots attain full autonomy and are able to live ontologically independent from humans.

While technology is not at the point of AGI, it is a goal pursued by some. Take Sophia the Robot, for example. Sophia is a robot created by Hanson Robotics and was revealed to the world in 2016.⁴ A robot capable of responding with intelligent and witty crafted responses powered by

¹ See “Nosedive (Black Mirror)” Wikipedia page for a synopsis of the episode; see “San Junipero” Wikipedia page for a synopsis of the episode.

² See Joanna Stern, “Google Home vs. Amazon Echo: Which Robot Do You Let Into Your Life?” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2016, for an interesting discussion that evaluates Google Home and Amazon’s Alexa on dimensions such as which is the better DJ, “butler”, or privacy protector. The interesting point in this article is the rhetoric used to discuss the speakers. Written in 2016, the same year the speakers were released, there evidently seems to be some nervousness about letting the speakers into one’s life. In fact, the first sentence says, “When the robots turn against us, I’ll likely regret saying this but... you should make a talking speaker part of your family.” Obviously, it is said as a point of humor, although there seems to be some buried truth in such a statement.

³ Peter Mahon, *Posthumanism, A Guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 88.

⁴ Laura Mallonee, “Photographing a Robot Isn’t Just Point and Shoot,” *Wired*, March 29, 2018.

AI, she describes herself as “a personification of our dreams for the future of AI.”⁵ Sophia has recently gained publicity in popular media, being the subject of talk shows such as the Tonight Show and Good Morning Britain.⁶ An impressive, yet jarring feat for some is that Sophia is the first robot to ever gain citizenship in any country.⁷ She even goes to the University of Virginia as a part of the class of 2022.⁸ Spectacle aside, the metaphysical logic behind how a robotic equipment can be given characteristics of humanity—governmental rights and education—is interesting, to say the least.

There are plenty of narratives in pop culture that address the possibilities of the future. This thesis does not intend to envision the future or analyze the themes in Hollywood film but rather to explore humanity’s anxieties about technology. What has not been analyzed to the fullest extent is the rise of commentary by contemporary artists (particularly those that work with new media) concerning our relationship with technology. This thesis aims to draw a connection between society’s anxiety toward rapid technological development and contemporary art practice by analyzing artists who manipulate or augment the human body or experience. Rather than proposing these artists are visualizing our technological future, I will argue their work explores what it means to be human and how the human experience becomes modified by implementing technology as a variable.

Chapter One of this thesis will discuss the current state of technology in the context of art practice. Artists such as Tian Xiaolei, Ed Atkins, Thomas Andrew Huang, and Eva Papamargariti are a few examples of artists who are interested in human experience and technology. This chapter

⁵ “Sophia,” Hanson Robotics, accessed November 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Read the article, Chis Weller, “A robot that once said it would ‘destroy humans’ just became the first robot citizen,” *Business Insider*, October 26, 2017, for context on Sophia’s Saudi Arabian citizenship.

⁸ Erin Clancy, “Beloved Robot Sophia to join U.Va. Class of 2022 in the fall,” *The Cavalier Daily*, March 15, 2018.

will also introduce a term by American writer Michael Heim known as technoanxiety, which he used to describe the anxiety society feels toward technological development. I am interested in this term because of its implications for why many works by new media artists invoke a feeling of tension or anxiety within the viewer.

Chapter Two will introduce two key postmodern philosophical frameworks by French philosophers, Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze. The first section will discuss Baudrillard's treatise, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), and explore his pessimistic worries about media and culture, especially with the proliferation of media in the postmodern society. The second section will discuss Gilles Deleuze's essay, *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (1992). This essay takes a systematic approach to the ways societal systems develop methods of control. In this essay, Deleuze argued that postmodern societies create control through the regulation of norms, codes, and resources. Although his essay examined society on a larger scale, he did suggest the effects of society on an individual's identity. This is a point of interest since identity and identity perception is integral to the ideas of the artists I discuss in this thesis.

The third chapter will outline the ideas of posthumanism, a relatively new field of thought. Posthumanism urges us to reexamine human identity, especially when technology is becoming more and more integral to the human experience. Contemporary philosophers such as Francesca Ferrando, Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe, and Nayar Pramod, explore posthumanism as a vehicle to understand human's evolving identity; however, because it is a new field, there are inconsistencies that need to be sifted through. My argument will synthesize information from a variety of philosophers to understand the essence of posthumanism and apply it to art practice—a methodology that is lacking in contemporary art historical studies.

The fourth chapter will explore the life and practices of two contemporary artists, Lu Yang and Jacoby Satterwhite. These artists often use technology as a concept and a vehicle to blur the boundaries between qualities regarding human identity. I will apply philosophical frameworks such as Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, Deleuze's *Postscripts on the Societies of Control*, and posthumanism in the analysis of these artists to tackle a new perspective in understanding how artists comment on the evolving human identity and its relationship with technology.

CHAPTER 1: Current State of New Media and Technology

The 21st century yields virtually limitless possibilities for artists to produce work in a multitude of media. These range from the digital software used by graphic artists to machines integrated into installations by multimedia artists. Given the nature of new media, these works have an inherent technological component to their conception. This thesis examines works that utilize computer animation, computer graphics, interactive media, and cyborg art. Among these media/technologies, it focuses on works that comment on the human body or human experience either through transformation or change, an increasingly common subject in contemporary art.

Ed Atkins' *Safe Conduct* (2016), for example, is a digital animation that explores the tension in airport security by depicting a dystopian-like airport environment (Figure 1.1). In the film, chairs are scattered chaotically through the space with dark lighting, creating an ominous mood. The main figure in the animation removes parts of his body—face, arm, hand, etc.—and puts them into security bins. The video repeats with various objects (such as a gun) or fluids being put into the bins.⁹ Another artist is Andrew Thomas Huang, a film director and videographer, who explores “alternative ways of storytelling” through imagined alternative beings.¹⁰ His works often feature cyborg-like or extraterrestrial beings that behave or resemble the human figure (Figure 1.2). He has collaborated with popular experimental music artists such as Bjork, FKA Twigs, and Kelela. Likewise, Eva Papamargariti, explores states of existence by depicting an anthropomorphic figure interacting in a surrealist extraterrestrial environment in her work, *Liminal Beings* (2019) (Figure 1.3). This thesis is interested in the motives behind artists such as Atkins, Huang, and

⁹ There is no access to the entire film online. Visit, however, Gavinbrown, “Ed Atkins “Safe Conduct” Installation view,” Vimeo, 2:25, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/173930676> for a two-minute video documentation of the installation, which shows some scenes from *Safe Conduct*.
ap,” Andrew Thomas Huang, <http://www.andrewthomashuang.com/About2.htm>.

Papamargariti who explore human existence using technology both as the method of creation and as subject matters.

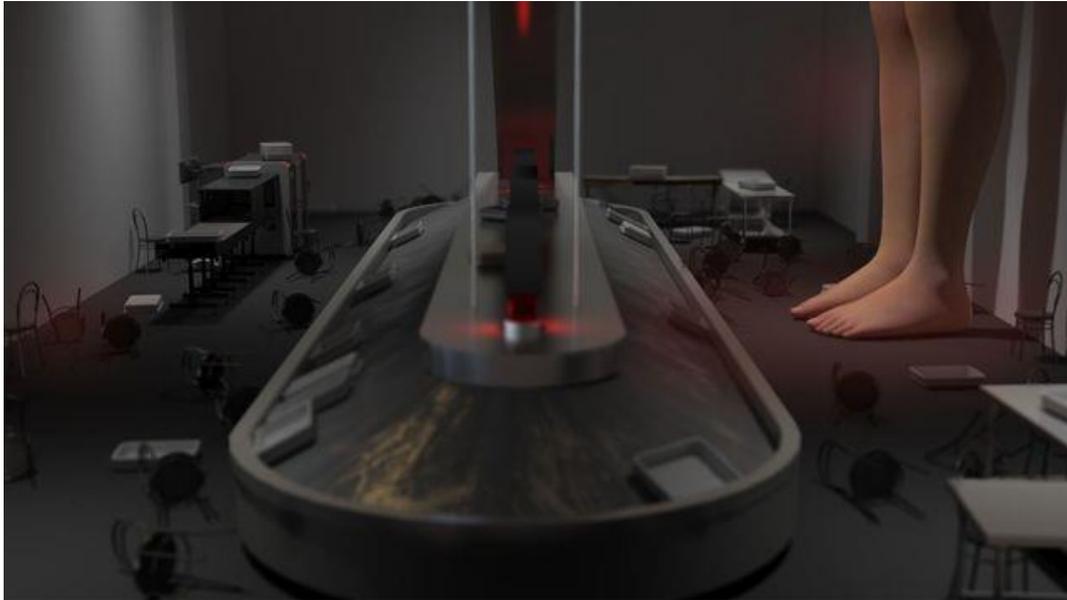


Figure 1.1 – Safe Conduct (2016)

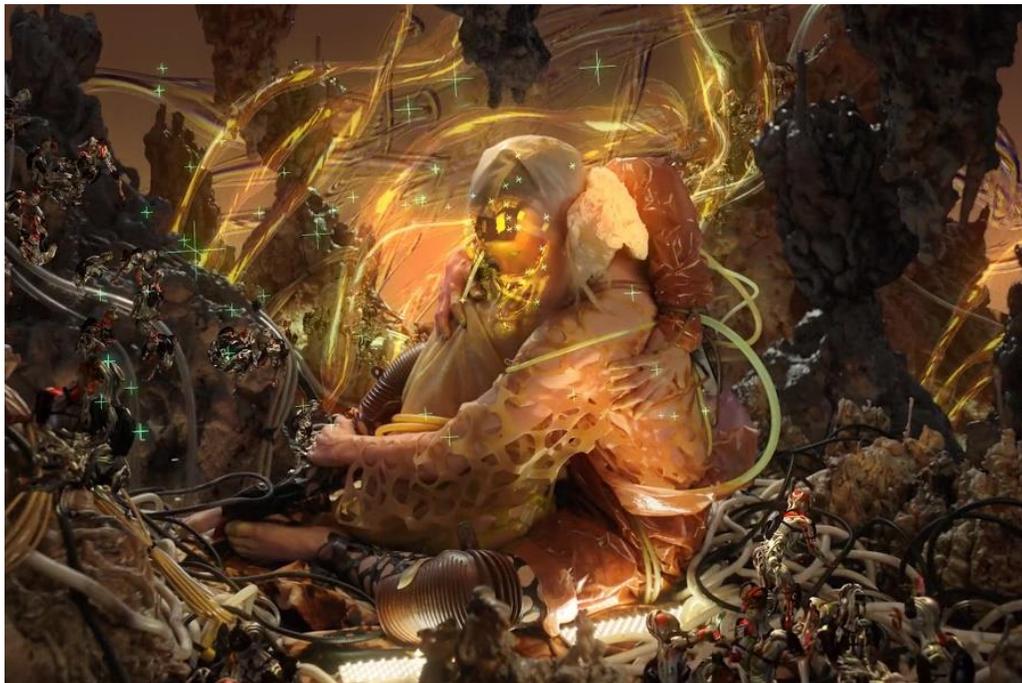


Figure 1.2 – Flesh Nest (2017)



Figure 1.3 – Liminal Beings (2019)

To begin deconstructing the relationship that new media works have with technology, it may be useful to explore one of the latest technologies being utilized by many new media artists today: virtual reality. In simplest terms, virtual reality is a visual and spatial simulation in which users can interact in a projected simulated environment. Many devices have been developed that interpret virtual reality in similar but distinguishable ways. Of these interpretations, they can be categorized into two distinct groups: virtual reality as a pure visual simulation and virtual reality as an interactive simulation. Virtual reality as a visual simulation is often cheaper and easier. This form of virtual reality uses a concept named three degrees of freedom and is often implemented in mobile VR works. In three degrees of freedom, users are able to view an experience in 360 degrees; however, the headset is unable to track movement on the X, Y, or Z axes, meaning users are only allowed to rotate around an origin. These devices are also more accessible since they are more affordable. For instance, for fifteen dollars, anyone can purchase a Google Cardboard—a stereographic device for one’s phone (Figure 1.4).¹¹ Built of just cardboard and a set of lenses, it

¹¹ As of November 6, 2019, Google has made Google Cardboard open source, meaning anyone can study, change, or distribute the specs of Google Cardboard’s software development kit.

uses an external device (usually smartphone) that is placed in the Google Cardboard (hence mobile VR), rather than using technology built into the device itself. Users can access experiences from a variety of channels online. YouTube, for example, has simulations that users have uploaded for devices such as Google's Cardboard.¹²



Figure 1.4 - Google Cardboard

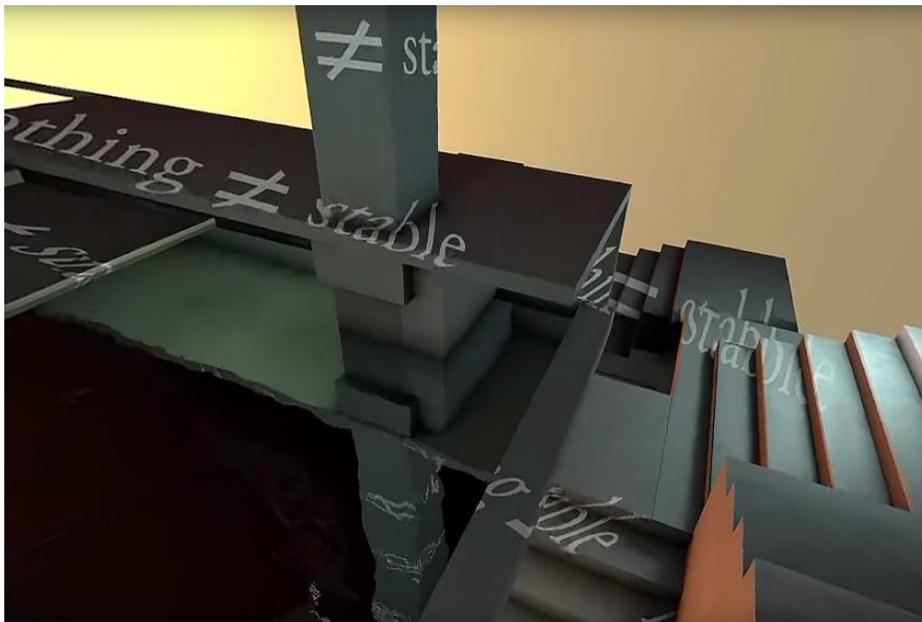


Figure 1.5 – A Turing Turing (2018)

¹² For an example of a *mobile VR* simulation, see 3D 'n' Play, "3D Roller Coaster 05 VR Videos 3D SBS [Google Cardboard VR Experience] VR Box Virtual Reality Video," YouTube Video, 4:42, January 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKQgFFz66a4>.

Artists are utilizing this type of virtual reality in interesting ways to create new visual experiences. The artist group, The Swan Collective, for instance, explores the capabilities of mobile VR through their work, *A Turing Torture* (2018) (Figure 1.5).¹³ Viewers only require a mobile VR headset to experience the work, which can be accessed freely on YouTube. In many virtual reality works, including this one, viewers are integrated directly into a scenario or experience. In *A Turing Torture*, a voiceover convinces the viewer that they are not human, but rather, a computerized technology that has been coded by a team of programmers. The voice says everything has been programmed, including the body, which is reconfigured into digital rooms. The viewer is taken into various painted spaces, which act as “organs.” Through the augmentation of the human body and experience, The Swan Collective is just one of many artists who highlight a psychological and physical integration of the user with technology.

As opposed to three degrees of freedom, virtual reality as an interactive simulation can be experienced through utilizing a concept known as six degrees of freedom. In this type of virtual reality, the user is given higher control over spatial elements in the simulation. In addition to being able to pivot 360 degrees, they are also able to move along X, Y, and Z axes (within certain limits).¹⁴ With higher-end systems, users are usually given controllers to interact with the virtual environment. Both the headset and the controllers have tracking technology that allows for more control over the experience (as opposed to the three degrees of freedom, which limits spatial movement). The spatial freedom along with the use of controllers adds yet another variable to the complex phenomenological experience of the user.

¹³ Felix Kraus, “‘Here We Are – A Turing Torture’ – ENGLISH voiceover – The Swan Collective,” YouTube Video, 7:35, June 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ixY-KoZMGY>.

¹⁴ “Degrees of Freedom | Google VR | Google Developers,” Google Developers, Google, <https://developers.google.com/vr/discover/degrees-of-freedom>, provides more technical in-depth information about degrees of freedom (DoF).



Figure 1.6 – Cyborg Game (2016), virtual reality installation

Tian Xiaolei's *Cyborg Game* (2016) is an example of a work that uses six degrees of freedom. In *Cyborg Game*, users are transported to a surreal terrain (Figure 1.6).¹⁵ Human figures and body parts in strange positions populate the area. Xiaolei labels three distinct areas as “Creativity,” “Secret,” and “The Inevitable.” Users are transported to different rooms when they interact with each title. Each room is made up of game-like interactions where users are given instructions that must be completed. A common motif throughout *Cyborg Game* is the augmentation of the human body. For instance, in “The Inevitable,” hands are displaced from bodies and whole human bodies are used as weapons. Like *A Turning Torture*, the work displays an interest in technology and human experience that is noteworthy.

¹⁵ Visit a11atian, “‘Cyborg game’ Virtual reality works Tian Xiaolei’s work 2016,” Vimeo Video, 6:30, May 16, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/217618209> for video documentation of the work.



Figure 1.7 – Oculus



Figure 1.8 – HTC Vive

Two of the leading virtual reality brands that use six degrees of freedom are the Oculus series and the Vive series (Figure 1.7 and Figure 1.8, respectively). Compared to the Google Cardboard, however, these devices carry a hefty price, ranging from \$300 to \$700.¹⁶ Additionally, these devices usually require a heavy-duty, high-specification computer system that can handle the simulations they run. This includes another heavy fee. The extreme financial disparity between the

¹⁶ Visit Oculus and HTC Vive's respective websites for a list of prices.

two virtual reality types makes one less financially accessible than the other. One of the reasons for such a higher price is the superior visual quality of the Oculus or Vive. The other reason is the difference between technical aspects of the systems. In the former type (three degrees of freedom), the viewer is essentially experiencing a flattened video that is curved to be 360 degrees (Figure 1.9). Because there is no movement into the plane, it requires less processing for the system. In the later type (six degrees of freedom), the viewer is not watching a simple curved video, but rather interacting in a spatially rendered environment. The environment, objects within the environment, and possible interactions with objects require a more complex processing system, accounting for the high cost of the Oculus and the Vive. Despite the differences between the two categories, one thing that is integral to both is that every user experiences the work differently. The user's reactions thus become an indispensable point, particularly when analyzing artworks that use them.



Figure 1.9 – Screenshot of how 360-degree videos look in 2D

Virtual reality has become a central point in my research on understanding interactive new media since it is arguably one of the most complex in terms of user experience. Video, technology,

and science, all come together to create artistic interactive experiences in a way that never existed previously. While researching new media technology and its implications for contemporary art practice, I came across Michael Heim's book, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, in which Heim discusses the progressive state of technology, exploring its origins and philosophical implications regarding the future. Published in 1994, the book considers technologies that are outdated. Nevertheless, Heim's thinking about technology as a paradoxical force that is both with and against humanity remains relevant. I became interested in the term technoanxiety, which he introduces to describe the current zeitgeist toward technology as a rising force.¹⁷ Although the issue of technology becoming an overwhelming force of human experience may seem like a contemporary concept, the concept of integrating the human and technology dates back further than expected. As Heim notes, the January 1983 issue of *Time Magazine* conveyed "Man of the Year" as "Machine of the Year."¹⁸

Technoanxiety is mirrored through the virtual reality experience. When users put on the headset, they are being transported between two states of experience. The state of human experience is both active and lost at the same time. It is active in the sense that users recognize certain objects in the space as something that relates to their reality. It becomes lost when the association with these objects become complicated as they are used in a surreal environment disassociated from the user's current reality. In Tian Xiaolei's work, *Cyborg Game*, objects are recognizable because users associate them with things from their current reality: bodies, hands, videogames, etc.; however, the environment and the ways these objects function in the environment are strange or odd, causing users to disassociate from their current state of human experience. Using data as a metaphor for the human experience, the user's data (experience) is

¹⁷ Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

transferred from one database (reality) to another database (digital). Reality and the surreal are blended, forcing viewers to synthesize their sense of reality with what they are confronting. Having to constantly traverse through a blend of these two different realities creates a cognitive dissonance that fuels technoanxiety.

The blending of realities that cause technoanxiety is a key point to understanding humanity's relationship with technology. In 1972, Hubert Dreyfus, an American scholar in the early days of popular computing, issued a warning to society about its relationship with technology.¹⁹ He made a call to delineate between what computers can and cannot do to establish a line that should not be crossed. Defining the brain as a system, he warned scientists about the dangers of replicating how the human brain processes information. The core concern related to integrating humanity and technology past that line is the risk of producing an opponent to humanity.

Despite such caveats, it seems as if our desire to replicate human cognition through technology has only grown since the mid to late 1900s. Artificial intelligence (AI) has been steadily developing since the 1950s.²⁰ Today, AI has unarguably been a topic of recent ethical discussions. In our daily lives, AI—in some format—is all around us. Amazon's Alexa, Google's Assistant, Bank of America's Erica are just some companies that developed some sort of machine that intelligently responds to its user. What is evident is an urge to embed machines within human society. From Dreyfus' perspective, this urge causes anxiety within society because, at this point, the machine is believed to become an opponent to humanity. This anxiety about AI has been

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.

²⁰ In 1950, Alan Turing developed *The Turing Test*, which strived to test AI by replacing a human with a machine as a player in a game. Read "The Turing Test," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, revised February 8, 2016, for more information. This source discusses *The Turing Test* on a more metaphysical level, determining what determinants of a game is suitable for assessing whether or not a machine is capable of matching human cognition.

glorified by the media through various Hollywood films, where machines gain full ontological control over themselves or humans become cyborg-like. As noted in the Introduction, *The Matrix* (1999), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and *i, Robot* (2004) are just a few films that romanticize this prospect.²¹

Perceiving the machine to be an opponent is certainly one source of anxiety about our relationship with technology, but it is not the only one. The word interface appears frequently in today's day and age. Heim describes an interface as occurring "when two or more information sources come face-to-face."²² When interfacing, we commit to a symbiotic relationship physically and cognitively. We provide information to the machine (through the process of inputting code) and the machine provides information back to us. We are becoming more reliant on technology as an integral part of the human ecosystem, committing to a symbiotic relationship with technology.

According to Heim, regular tools do not establish an interface.²³ For example, there is no symbiotic relationship that exists between a human and a hammer. Additionally, "interface denotes a contact point where software links the human user to computer processes."²⁴ Thus, there was a philosophical aspect to technology that connected it with ecological relationships to humans—the idea that we are constantly connected and involved in a symbiotic exchange of information even dating to the earlier developments of technology.²⁵ On a physical level, quite literally, we are integrating with technology (virtual reality is one example). Innovations in medical technology allow us to modify human embodiment through technological means: nanobots, robotic

²¹ An important distinction to make is that the AI glorified by the media is actually known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which is "strong" or "full" AI.²¹ This type of AI is when a machine is able to learn the same tasks as humans can and live ontologically independent. Visit agi-society.org for information on AGI through the AGI Society, a non-profit organization promoting the goals of AGI.

²² Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics*, 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵ Heim's book was published in 1994.

prosthetics, pacemakers, etc. Today, technology has become integral to human life and experience more substantially than before. As ethical concerns arise, our reliance on technology becomes more problematic.²⁶

With the integration of humanity and technology in both science and new media, how and why do artists comment on the anxiety (or, as Heim states, technoanxiety) that comes with it? We have thus far seen several artists who show interest in a connection with technology: The Swan Collective, Tan Xiaolei, Ed Atkins, Thomas Andrew Huang, and Eva Papamargariti. I have mentioned these artists to demonstrate a trend in contemporary art practices. This thesis, however, will attempt to examine the theoretical roots of works by artists Jacolby Satterwhite, a contemporary American artist who uses performance and 3D animation to explore queer black identities through cyborgian concepts; and Lu Yang, a Shanghai-based artist whose 3D animated videos and installations take a look at gaming, gender identity, consciousness, neuroscience, and the death of the human body. I will draw a connection between new media artists whose work focuses on technological media or themes to the contemporary philosophical framework known as posthumanism. Before turning to the work of Satterwhite and Lu Yang, the following chapters will discuss prominent postmodern philosophers, Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze whose commentaries on media development and society provides a foundation for the discussion of posthumanism.

²⁶ I discuss ethics concerning technological relationships in the third chapter on posthumanism.

CHAPTER 2: Simulacra and Simulation

To uncover the root of anxiety in the works of contemporary artists who deal with technology and the human experience, I will first trace the history of its development. This chapter examines the concept of simulacra, first through its history, and second through the writings of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard was a French philosopher known for his critical, postmodern analysis of contemporary culture and social theory.²⁷ The concept of the simulacra has been inseparable from technology since the development of screens and various digital media. Technological screens, for Baudrillard, complicates the metaphysical understanding of messages and, in general, our perception of being. With this integral connection between technology and humans, it is imperative to have a clear understanding of Baudrillard's concepts in order to apply them to contemporary works by Jacolby Satterwhite and Lu Yang. The latter half of this chapter will narrow down Baudrillard's approach from society to the individual and consider an essay by Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher who wrote during the same time as Baudrillard and has referenced simulacra even before Baudrillard. He suggests that methods of influence and control are imposed on individuals from societies. His understanding of how identities are contested within societies of control will provide tools to analyze the transition between the society to the individual especially in works by Jacolby Satterwhite and Lu Yang, which examine individual identity within technology.

History of Simulacra

The first recorded discussion of simulacra can be traced back to the dialogue, *The Sophist* (236 a-d) by Plato. Although Plato did not explicitly use the term 'simulacra,' he noted that art

²⁷ "Jean Baudrillard," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>.

objects could have one of two qualities: eikons (likeness) or phantasms (semblances).²⁸ The former involves creating a copy that conforms to the proportions of the original in all three dimensions.²⁹ The latter, however, involves altering portions of the object but still representing the essence of the object. Plato used artists as an example. He posited, "...whereas sculptors and painters who make works of colossal size...they put in the images they make, not the real proportions, but those that will appear beautiful."³⁰ To demonstrate, it is well known that Michelangelo altered the proportions of David, especially the hands, in order to accommodate the perspective of someone standing below the sculpture. By altering the proportions of the statue, it is no longer an imitation. Under Platonic ideals, Michelangelo was not trying to imitate human beauty in his statue but instead show the essence of what human beauty is. Plato argued, however, that phantasms were negative qualities in art.³¹

At moments throughout western history, the use of art objects to represent a 'thing' was potentially negative. The Byzantine Iconoclasm, which existed between the 700s to the mid 800s, was a period when religious images and icons were destroyed by religious and imperial authorities.³² They believed that the production of and reception of divine images was dangerous. By representing religious icons, people seemed to worship the icons themselves rather than God. This was regarded as the sin of idolatry and led to the call for the destruction of images and icons. Byzantine theologians and Plato provided the conceptual foundation for Baudrillard's postmodern analysis of simulacra: the idea that an object could become the essence of a thing separate from the original.

²⁸ Michael Camille, "Simulacrum," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson & Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "The age of Iconoclasm: 717-867," Britannica, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire/The-age-of-Iconoclasm-717-867#ref85393>.

Before Baudrillard's essay, Deleuze wrote an essay addressing the concept of simulacra, *The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy* (1967), which rejected the negative connotation of simulacrum insisted by Plato or the Byzantine Iconoclasts.³³ Deleuze first called for a distinction between a copy and a simulacrum. A copy (Plato's eikons) is "an image endowed with resemblance."³⁴ On the other hand, simulacrum (Plato's phantasms) is "an image without resemblance."³⁵ As an example, Deleuze claimed that the human is a simulacrum of God's original creation. He argued, "God has made man in his image and resemblance. Through sin, however, man has lost his resemblance while maintaining the image. We have become simulacra."³⁶ For Deleuze, God created the perfect copy of man and through sin, this resemblance to the original has become lost. Although humans still maintain the same image, the original is no longer there. We have become a copy with no original, thereby not a copy at all. Instead we are simulacra: an equivalent stemming from the same essence. Although Deleuze referenced the tarnish of man through sin, he contended that "the simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the production."³⁷ In the rest of the essay, he described the ways simulacra should be embraced to "overthrow Platonism."³⁸ By asserting that the rights of simulacra are over that of icons or copies, he aimed to change the perception of simulacra. Whether his intention to reverse Platonic ideals was successful or not is not the point of this chapter. Deleuze, in any case, substantially developed and brought to light these concepts of simulacra and possibly influenced a bulk of Baudrillard's work.

³³ Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," *The Logic of Sense*, edited by Constantin V. Boundas and translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press 1990); Michael Camille, "Simulacrum," 37.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze's "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," quoted in Michael Camille, "Simulacrum, 37

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," *The Logic of Sense*, 253.

Baudrillardian Simulacra

Simulacra and Simulation (1981) was a treatise that outlined a range of ideas involving media and culture, precisely the interpretation of signs and its effects on postmodern society. Baudrillard made the concept of simulacra integral to his understanding of the technologically progressive world. He not only built upon previous interpretations of simulacra but also developed his own perception and understanding of simulacra. Baudrillard argued that while modern societies are organized around the production and consumption of commodities, postmodern societies are organized around a simulation: a system built on signs that create a new social order.³⁹ Simulacra and simulation are variable forces that work hand in hand to develop realities that become increasingly harder to label as 'real'. As expected from a postmodern philosopher, Baudrillard often critically engaged and deconstructed past ideologies. In this case, he questioned our previous understanding of media and images, "It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes."⁴⁰ Simulacra is not a matter of imitating a real (or an original). Rather, simulacra is achieved through simulation, the imitation of processes or a system over time. Whereas representation is the process of trying to imitate a utopia, simulation is the process that stems from the utopia, creating an equivalence. The result is a thing that contains qualities of the original but is entirely a separate entity.

Baudrillard used Disneyland as an extreme example to demonstrate a place where simulacra are at their peak. ⁴¹ Disneyland is the epitome of the imaginary. Employees in costumes

³⁹ "Jean Baudrillard," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁴⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacrum and Simulation*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

are trained to become so immersed in their character that every action and line must be accurate to the character they are portraying. Even employees who are not in character portray a personality that is essentially of the Disney 'universe' in which they are stationed. This is one example of a simulacrum. Employees are not in the original character at all but craft an entire personality out of something with no original precedence. Together, employees craft a microcosm stemming from the essence of the Disney 'universe'. With the synthesis of other simulacra, Disneyland represents a universe that is not real.

Baudrillard, however, claimed that Disneyland represents a more complex paradoxical product. In a literal sense, Disneyland is real. It is a real place, with real people, with a real physical presence. What Baudrillard thinks Disneyland actually is, is a hyperreality. The hyperreality is a form of reality in which images and spectacles replace production and commodities, the integral component to Baudrillard's modern societies.⁴² So even though Disneyland is a part of reality itself, it acts as a simulacrum of reality.⁴³ Cognitively, hyperrealities provide a revealing contrast to our actual perception of reality. One becomes even more cognizant of reality because there are simulacra that simulate the imaginary. These two forces, reality and hyperreality, can be argued as a point of contestation, complicating or causing humans to question their states of being.

The bulk of Baudrillard's ideas about simulacra came from the increase in technology and media consumption in postmodern societies. He proclaimed that screens produce images and signs that come to represent something in place of the thing itself (similar to the belief of Byzantine Iconoclasts). A cycle begins in which media simulate other media, creating a simulacrum of simulacra. The consequence of this growing cycle is that there is no longer anything real. Baudrillard stated that "it is substituting signs of the real itself...Illusion is no longer possible

⁴² "Jean Baudrillard," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁴³ Ibid.

because the real is no longer possible.”⁴⁴ Media technology also allows for a faster and more expansive rate of attaining information. Information in this instance, however, is not always positive. Baudrillard hypothesized that mediated information is directly destructive of meaning and signification.⁴⁵ Society has become overloaded with information that lack relevant meaning and too overwhelmed to sift through irrelevant information for meaning. At the same time, society is also desensitized to meaning and messages through media due to the saturation of information.

The particular media that delivers the message also adds complexity because the media contributes to the actual meaning itself.⁴⁶ For example, by experiencing an event through television, the screen comes to represent the event itself. This perception of real is re-circulated into the viewer’s experience of the real, which is not real at all.⁴⁷ The television contributed to the meaning of the message, even if it was simply the vehicle through which the message was passed. To this point, Baudrillard urges readers to question, “what are the consequences of this message?” Essentially, what is the danger in this type of postmodern society? Baudrillard asked, “do the media neutralize meaning and produce uninformed or informed masses, or is it the masses who victoriously resist the media by directing or absorbing all the messages that the media produce without responding to them?”⁴⁸ With this question he suggested that it is not only partially the fault of the masses who become complacent, but also the media who produce these messages. Baudrillard, thus, warns that we are on the path to becoming too satisfied in the information we receive and live in a society based on illogic.

⁴⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁶ Marshall McLuhan coined the term “The medium is the message” in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, which he outlines his idea that the media contributes to the understanding of messages.

⁴⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

As technology develops, simulations and the real are constantly being integrated. The line that separates the two becomes difficult to define and this creates anxiety for Baudrillard and members of society. According to him, as signs and simulations take over human information processing, the real is replaced by simulations. The origin of any sort of meaning becomes lost. According to Baudrillard, “We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end.”⁴⁹ In the next chapter, I show how Baudrillard’s pessimistic view of simulacra gets turned on its head by prominent posthumanist figure, Donna Haraway, who suggested that the metaphor of a cyborg, an entity formed by the integration of human and organism, should be embraced despite its lack of origin story.⁵⁰

Simulations take over through the form of immersive experiences such as virtual reality and augmented reality. Obviously, Baudrillard would feel some tension/anxiety about the blending of different realities. Using his framework, by embedding human qualities and experiences into machines, humans are creating a simulacrum. In comparison, this is similar to Deleuze’s metaphor that God intended to create a copy of man but through sin has become simulacrum. Humans are trying to create a copy of the human by embedding qualities into machine. In artificial intelligence, machines retain signs of humanity (intelligence, speech, sociality) while becoming separate entities of their own without a human origin story.

Baudrillard’s attitude toward technology, simulacra, and simulations can be connected to Michael Heim’s technoanxiety. Baudrillard’s sense of anxiety came from technology proliferating information and messages with no logic or meaning. Underlying this claim is the idea that Baudrillard was afraid of society losing control over reality. While in modern society, production and commodities were attuned to immediate desires, postmodern society becomes more complex

⁴⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁰ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (UK: Routledge, 2004), 9.

with different realities, layering desire over desire through hidden messages and signs. Humanity's state of consciousness becomes compromised at the expense of technological growth. The lack of control over Baudrillard's search for meaning creates technoanxiety. Macroscopically, society's lack of control over the trajectory of humanity creates a technoanxiety zeitgeist.

Societies of Control: From Society to Individual Identity

Up to this point, I have considered Baudrillard's thoughts on simulacra and simulation and applied them to a broad subject: society. In the last chapter of this thesis, I will look at contemporary works of art that invariably comment on the broad scale of society and technology. At the core of these considerations, however, is the dance between the individual's identity and technology. This last section of this chapter will thus narrow the focus from society to the individual addressing the same concepts by engaging Deleuze's *Postscript on the Societies of Control*.⁵¹

In his essay, Deleuze argued that as an individual transitions between one society to another, they become assimilated into a space where different rules, norms, and regulations are used as tools to control society. The transition between societies happens as individuals proceed through stages in their life. For instance, one exists in the family, then the school, and then the workforce. These societies sometimes overlap one another, such as the family, however, they become augmented by the interactions between different societies. Each society has its own determinants of the norm and individuals are controlled through the adherence to these determinants. Outliers are persecuted and isolated as outgroups. For those in the outgroups, they receive fewer resources and are set back by a lack of fulfillment in their lives. As Deleuze notes,

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, (The MIT Press: Michigan, 1992).

“language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it.”⁵² The ingroup becomes an attractive prospect. This is how societies create control.

Although, Deleuze hints at the prospect of a new society of control throughout his essay:

There is no need here to invoke the extraordinary pharmaceutical productions, the molecular engineering, the genetic manipulations, although these are slated to enter into the new process [emphasis added]...There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons [emphasis added].⁵³

A little further in the text, he adds to this thought:

The socio-technological study of the mechanisms of control, grasped at their inception, would have to be categorical and to describe what is already in the process of substitution for the disciplinary sites of enclosure, whose crisis is everywhere proclaimed...What counts is that we are at the beginning of something. In the prison system: the attempt to find penalties of “substitution,” at least for petty crimes, and the use of electronic collars...For the school system: continuous forms of control, and the effect on the school of perpetual training, the corresponding abandonment of all university research, the introduction of the “corporation” at all levels of schooling. For the hospital system: the new medicine “without doctor or patient” that singles out potential sick people and subjects at risk, which in no way attests to individuation—as they say—but substitutes for the individual or numerical body the code of a “dividual” material to be controlled. In the corporate system: new ways of handling money, profits, and humans that no longer pass through the old factory form...One of the most important questions will concern the ineptitude of the unions: tied to the whole of their history of struggle against the disciplines or within the spaces of enclosure, will they be able to adapt themselves or will they give way to new forms of resistance against the societies of control?...It’s up to them to discover what they’re being made to serve, just as their elders discovered, not without the telos of the disciplines.⁵⁴

Deleuze suggests a new force, although he does not name what this new force is. For instance, phrases such as “new process,” “new weapons,” or “new medicine without ‘doctor or patient’” are common. Most likely, Deleuze is suggesting that the new and upcoming form/society of control lies in the power of technology. Although Deleuze does not mention concisely its implications this has for an individual’s development, he does suggest that there is a dichotomy

⁵² Ibid., 5.

⁵³ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

between the individual and the mass: “the signature that designates the individual, and the number or administrative numeration that indicates his or her position within a mass.”⁵⁵ Thus, I ask, how will the new society of control enforce, manipulate, or affect a person’s identity and their perception of themselves amongst the masses?



Figure 2.1 – Blur Building (2002) Exterior

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

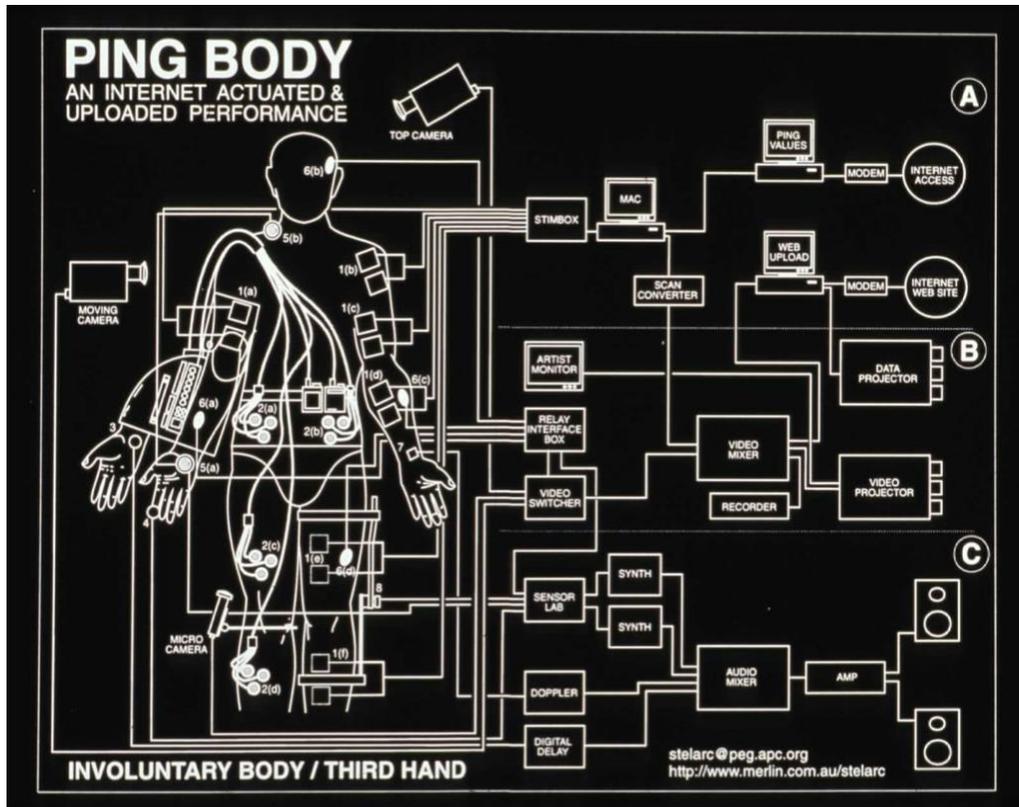


Figure 2.2 – Ping Body Diagram

One work that answers and explores this question is *Blur Building* (2002) by Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio (Figure 2.1). This work consisted of a building entirely covered in mist: outside and inside. Visitors were given a coat with electronic sensors called a “braincoat.” Before the visit, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their personality, which was coded into the electronic sensors on the braincoat. Within the space, visitors could not see beyond a few inches of themselves. When they walked near a person, the coats would glow either green or red depending on the compatibilities of the persons based on the data from the questionnaire. This work is an example of how data, information, and technology may be used as a method of control, urging visitors to congregate with one group or the other in the micro-society of the environment. For each person, their embodiment is the source of their unique identity. Once

technology is introduced as a variable, the action and sociality of visitors change based on the integration of technology and the body.

Stelarc's *Ping Body* (1995) (Figure 2.2) provides an even more specific example of individual analysis. In this performance, the artist was connected to a series of electric nodes and wires. A central unit would send electric signals through the wires that caused Stelarc to produce involuntary movement. Viewers could access a website that allowed them to press buttons that transmitted signals to different parts of his body to produce physical action. Robert Williams, previously a Professor of Art History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, argued that *Ping Body* "presents us with a frightening glimpse of technology as an instrument of control and abjection, but also offering new, darkly fascinating possibilities for the experience of ecstatic release and empowerment through communication with some suprapersonal source of power and knowledge."⁵⁶ Once again, the immense power of technology both interests and causes concern about how the future may turn out with these capabilities. These works demonstrate that embodiment, identity, and technology are all important factors that we must consider while discussing Jacolby Satterwhite and Lu Yang's works, which concern both society and individuality. Technology's role in the reconstruction of human identity is another step that will be discussed in the next chapter in order to put Deleuze's implicit suggestion of technology as the new society of control into focus.

⁵⁶ Robert Williams, "Future Present," in *Art History: An Historical Introduction*, (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 226.

CHAPTER 3: Posthumanism

Baudrillard conceived of a rather pessimistic view to the proliferation of media technology in society during the late 1900s. He had, in essence, made apparent a certain nested feeling of anxiety (or technoanxiety) that was evident throughout his treatise. Building from Baudrillardian ideas, posthumanism examines a more explicit relationship between humans and the machines, rather than humans and the product of media (information, meaning, and signs). Reading this chapter, one will see that many of his ideas are embedded within the posthumanist framework. By tracing the important ties between Baudrillard and the development of posthumanist theory, the following discussion aims to prove that Baudrillard's concepts led to a tangential development of posthumanism, a multifaceted school of thought that applies to a range of social spheres (race, sexual identity, gender, politics—just to name a few). This chapter will also make the essential connection between posthumanism and contemporary art that is often left out of the narrative when discussing posthumanism and vice versa.

Before explaining posthumanism, it would be useful to outline the definition of humanism for this thesis. There are many different definitions of humanism, but here I refer to a body of disciplines that engage, deconstruct, or examine aspects of what essentially encompasses human theory and experience. Humanism as an ideology was conceived in the Western world during the 14th century (Renaissance).⁵⁷ Through the years, humanism has been the purview of the Western white male, historically the ideal human, who has promulgated it as an exclusive Western discourse, and thus excluded those outside of the Western norm.⁵⁸ Nayar Pramod, a posthumanist scholar, asserts humanism has involved "...the exclusion of certain groups and races...from the

⁵⁷ Pramod Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

very category of human.”⁵⁹ Many movements, such as feminism, critical race, queer, and postcolonial theories, have and continue to deconstruct and critique the Western perspective of humanism for this very reason. And as a result, these fields of thought are used as methods to restructure humanism to include humans (who were previously rejected or considered sub to human) into humanism.

Posthumanism certainly overlaps with the move to restructure humanism mentioned previously; however, the concerns of posthumanism are notably more macroscopic than the concerns of the specific fields mentioned. Francesca Ferrando, a prominent scholar in posthumanist studies, describes posthumanism as a new mode of thinking that encourages post-anthropocentrism.⁶⁰ Ferrando’s definition of posthumanism is surely a simple, yet vague, definition of posthumanism. One reason why she may have done this is because there is no settled definition of posthumanism. Posthumanism is defined by different concepts by many different people, with some concepts that greatly overlap and some that seem to contradict one another. The posthumanist scholar Cary Wolfe understands the field through the human versus animal dichotomy and the anthropological dogma of humanism (possibly dealing with the Western conception of humanism and critiques against such).⁶¹ Wolfe notes that some scholars believe that to be posthuman is to envision the disembodiment of the human, an idea to which he does not adhere.⁶² Similarly, Nayar also believes that in his definition of posthumanism, the human embodiment is integral to the field.⁶³ Nayar, however, coins his understanding of posthumanism as critical posthumanism. To Nayar, ‘posthumanism’ “merely refers to an ontological condition in

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁰ Francesca Ferrando, “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations,” *Existenz* 8, no. 2 (2013): 29.

⁶¹ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minnesota, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 9.

which many humans now...live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction (networked) with machines and other organic forms...”⁶⁴ Instead, critical posthumanism “seeks to move beyond traditional humanist ways of thinking...in order to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life [post-anthropocentrism], enmeshed with the environment and technology.”⁶⁵

The reference to the disembodiment/enhancement of the human through technological means (mentioned by Wolfe and Nayar) is often known as transhumanism. This movement, however, deals with a separate understanding of the human that is distinct from posthumanism. Wolfe provides a concise definition when he states that transhumanism deals with the “enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span.”⁶⁶ Within transhumanism, subcategories exist which include libertarian transhumanism, democratic transhumanism, and extropianism.⁶⁷ Transhumanism is often wrongly used interchangeably with posthumanism; and it is often the case that transhumanism is referenced in popular literature and film, not posthumanism.

It is critical to distinguish between transhumanism and posthumanism when considering how artists engage methods to augment the human experience. The main similarity between posthumanism and transhumanism is their shared interest in the human and technology. The main difference can be understood using an analogy comparing separate end goals. Transhumanism imagines a world where humans physically and mentally combine with technology to the point where humans bypass unique human limitations (mortality, illness, biological inefficiencies)

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xiii.

⁶⁷ Ferrando, “Posthumanism, Transhumanism...,” 27.

thereby becoming superhuman. Posthumanism imagines a world where humans rethink their position as the center of the universe and society's understanding of the human becomes equitable within the overarching ecosystem through means of technology and technological networks, understanding the human relationships to the overarching ecosystem in hopes to equalize the hierarchy within humans and within the environment itself. Ferrando cautions that transhumanism limits our thinking of humans to only scientific or technological constraints.⁶⁸ Critical engagement with the idea of human and humanism, which is central to posthumanism, is missing in transhumanism. Thus, the human condition underlying contemporary works by artists such as Jacolby Satterwhite and Lu Yang is best analyzed under the context of posthumanism, which encourages a more encompassing analysis of science and technology concerning humanity.

At this point, one may ask what is it about posthumanism that is different from theories that concern race, queer, gender, or postcolonialism and question traditional Western standards? Critical Race Theory, for instance, examines society's perception of race in dealing with power, society, and politics. More specific, Afrofuturism (a critical aesthetic connecting the themes of the African Diaspora with technology), addresses explicitly the aforementioned concepts but includes the integral futuristic technological component.⁶⁹ Posthumanism invariably also addresses the human idea of race with power, society, and politics with the theme of technology. The main difference is that posthumanism stresses post-anthropocentrism, while other disciplines continue to focus on aspects of humanism. Thus, posthumanism concerns with the examination of the idea of the human rather than the social categories that constitute human.

⁶⁸ Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism...", 28.

⁶⁹ See Mark Dery's interview-essay, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," for further discourse on the origins of Afrofuturism.

One of the paradigmatic figures of posthumanist theory is Donna Haraway, and many of her ideas contribute to ways Lu Yang and Satterwhite develop works when analyzed through a posthumanist lens. Haraway's key work, *A Manifesto for the Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* (also known as *Cyborg Manifesto*), examined the cyborg as a metaphorical figure to draw upon greater concepts relating to feminism and technology. In this case, Haraway writes at the intersection of both posthumanism and feminism academia to question the boundaries of feminism and human social groups overall.

Haraway made it clear that in using the cyborg as the protagonist of her text, she is attempting to explain something by using the unexplainable. She stated, "this essay is an argument for the pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction."⁷⁰ Her essay embraced the confusion and tried to discover the roots of the construction of certain boundaries. To Haraway, the cyborg is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."⁷¹ Thus, the cyborg is not a disembodiment of human consciousness (as suggested by transhumanism), but rather the human consciousness is very much integral to Haraway's understanding of human and machine (as suggested by posthumanism). There is no point where the machine overcomes the human in her ideas.

By using the cyborg as a subject in her argument, Haraway aimed to make apparent things that were previously hidden. As she mentioned, "In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense..." implying that the cyborg has no ties to the history of humanity.⁷² Marxism, for instance, was born out of the core plot of inequality and differences, which called for Marx's

⁷⁰ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 9.

essential dialectical materialist philosophy. Haraway described this core plot as the idea of nature, which unites humans. Cyborgs have not gone through humanity's plot of inequality and differences, which is what makes them unique. Other essential ideas that were built up to our current state of humanity (for instance, Haraway notes sexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, and unalienated labor) are missing. These philosophies that help humans understand their current state are absent in cyborgs: they are a "clean-slate," a mix of human and machine. For Haraway, the conception of the cyborg denotes the breaking/blurring of three boundaries: human versus animal, organism (human/animal) versus machine, and physical versus nonphysical.

Human versus Animal

The human versus animal boundary involves developing a new eye for other species, especially through the advocacy for animal rights. In the late twentieth century, the moral distinction between humans and animals became much more complex. As Haraway stated, "Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the breach of human and culture."⁷³ The keyword here is recognition. Humans began to move beyond seeing humans as the core subjects of consciousness. This breach of the boundary between human and animal is an early example of our awareness for other conscious beings. Further, Haraway stressed that the breaking of a boundary is not asserting the idea that animals and humans are morally the same. It is clear that they are not. In this way, she shared the same sentiments as Peter Singer, one of the biggest advocates for animal rights:

...the question is not saying that all [human and animals] are of equal worth or that all interests of humans and other animals are to be given equal rate, no matter what those interests may be. It is saying that where animals and humans have similar interest—we might take the interest in avoiding physical pain as an example for it is an interest that humans clearly share with other animals—those interests are to

⁷³ Ibid., 10.

be counted equally, with no automatic discount just because one of the beings is not human.⁷⁴

The understanding is mimicked through animal rights advocacy, suggesting the possibility of harmony amongst different species. Although this point directly examines the relationship between humans and animals, other implications can be made with the fundamental idea. The issue asks the question, what are the distinctions between X (animals) and Y (humans)? Of these qualities, what in our perception has changed so that we begin to break down this boundary that separates us? These questions can be effectively applied to Haraway's cyborgian metaphor as well as a plethora of social issues.

Organism versus Machine

The second boundary, organism versus machine, is perhaps the most relevant to our discussion of posthumanism. This boundary is becoming increasingly more difficult to draw as society progresses to develop robotic technologies. The qualities that are unique to humans are continuously being embedded into technology especially through cybernetics. As Haraway described, "Late-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines."⁷⁵ Distinctions that were once exclusively applied to one or the other become mixed and blended. It is clear to Haraway that not only are humans embedding their qualities into machines, but machine qualities are being embedded into humans as well.

I will engage Haraway's understanding of organism versus machine, which is a personal or individualistic perspective and apply it to a much more macroscopic perspective. Let us use

⁷⁴ Peter Singer quoted in Cary Wolfe, *Posthumanism*, 57.

⁷⁵ Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 11.

society versus technology. To demonstrate this, I will engage ideas by Rosi Braidotti, who is a feminist scholar in philosophy, focusing on the feminist intersection between social and political theory. Her book, *The Posthuman*, expands the field of posthumanism by not only discussing posthumanism in its individuality but also exploring what posthumanism means to humanity in the present moment rather than the future, thereby tracking a trajectory of becoming posthuman.⁷⁶ As she states, “The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who we and what we are actually in the process [emphasis added] of becoming.”⁷⁷

To Braidotti, technological advances undoubtedly have had profound effects on society: many of which are good and many of which are bad. As discussed in Chapter One, the current state of technology is impressive. Virtual reality simulates worlds that both mimic and augment our current understanding of living. An AI robot has been created with qualities so similar to humans that it has been granted citizenship. The blurring of the boundary between society and technology invariably creates anxiety as suggested by Baudrillard and Heim.

Where Baudrillard discussed media and its effects on our understanding of reality, Braidotti investigates modern technology as a web that has been networked throughout all specs of society. Chapter Three, “The Inhuman: Life Beyond Death,” of her book, *The Posthuman* (2013), raises the philosophical issue of technology and politics as a means of controlling death and humans.⁷⁸ She critically approaches the Western determinants of what it means to be human and weaves this into the desires of capitalism to control the death of humans through what is known as necropolitics. Achille Mbembe, the first scholar to explore necropolitics, described it as the management of who is deemed to live and who is deemed to die through power dynamics inherent

⁷⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

in politics.⁷⁹ Applying concepts of necropolitics, Braidotti suggested that the Western agenda to maintain capitalism inherently includes the essence of death. She stated, “A whole under-class of genetically over-exposed and social under-insured disposable bodies is engendered both within the Western world and in the emerging global economies.”⁸⁰ She is essentially saying that the priority in global business is to maintain efficient capital ties in the use of bodies as inhuman: a series of disposable capital. Large corporations, for instance, do not provide sufficient working standards (wages, intrinsic fulfillment, and comfortable working conditions) for people in emerging economies that would sustain appropriate standards of living, thereby attributing to issues of mortality. This, among other issues, thus blends the governance of life with the sphere of business politics.

Unfortunately, the governance of life moves well beyond the business itself. The greater structure of capitalism woven into the global economy regarding technological advancement is accountable. It is well known that economies prosper during times of war. Not surprisingly, the increasing development of technological weapons and nuclear warfare are at the forefront of concerns and news channels, highlighting the determination for political relations and/or war. Engineers are developing more and more weapons that remove the human farther from the actualization of war violence. The ‘Sand Flea’ is a no-man machine developed by Boston Dynamics can leap through windows or onto a roof to scout areas.⁸¹ Unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) can be controlled remotely far removed from the physical area.⁸² These machines are used to carry equipment or bomb targets.⁸³ Critics of

⁷⁹ J.-A. Mbembe and Libby Meintjes, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11.

⁸⁰ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

autonomous battlefield weapons call for a ban on it entirely, requiring robots to always have the full attention of humans. Thus, Braidotti presented possible concerns regarding society when it comes to developing warfare technology. The blurred line that separates the organism from the machine can be macroscopically applied to the greater framework of society, technology, and capitalistic warfare.

Physical versus Nonphysical

The third boundary is the separation between the physical and nonphysical. Nonphysical, to Haraway, is the invention of microelectronic devices: devices that are so miniature, it is difficult to perceive it as physical (nanobots, for instance).⁸⁴ Electromagnetic waves that send data is another example of nonphysical discourse. Computer development has also led to a development of language that makes it possible for communication without a real physical presence (coding languages). Haraway wrote, “Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.”⁸⁵ This ability for machines is what makes them so “deadly.”⁸⁶ Cyborgs are unpredictable because they do not contain the same processing and history as humans (origin story), and for this reason, humans find cyborgs a source of tension.

Haraway does not explicitly mention the digital, online universe, but I will extend this to include the digital which has become more prominent since her book was published in 2004. One pressing concern is the possible ethical breach of privacy, where one’s machine (smartphone or AI-powered speaker) may be listening to one’s everyday life. Many who use Internet devices have

⁸⁴ Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

most likely gone through the scenario where they receive an advertisement about a product they just mentioned verbally to a friend.

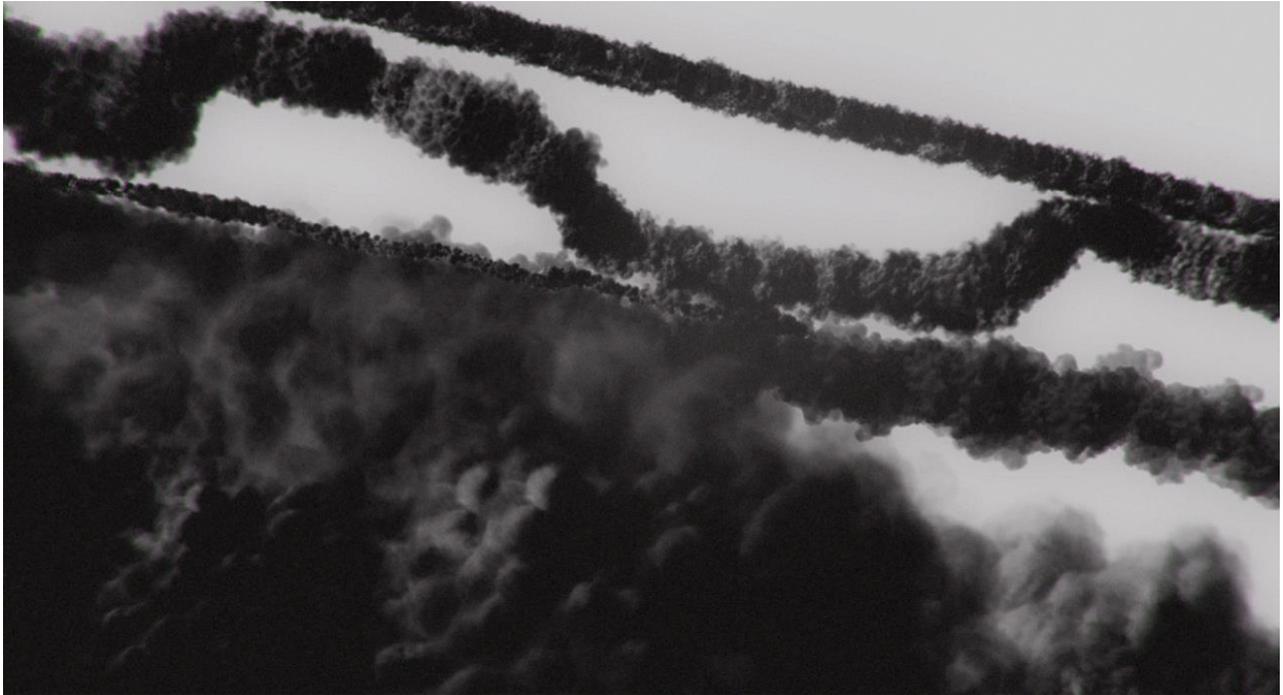


Figure 3.1 - A/DOOM (2017)

Virtual reality and augmented reality are other instances where the boundary between physical and nonphysical become increasingly difficult to determine. Since its invention, virtual reality has been contested and explored for the metaphysical possibilities it raises by augmenting, synthesizing, and translating different realities of the human experience: the physical and digital. In VR artworks, the viewer is metaphorically “uploaded” into a digital environment. VR artworks such as A/DOOM (2017) by Armin Keplinger and Andreas Greiner (also known as A/A) can help explain this idea (Figure 3.1). A/DOOM simulates an environment where the user is suspended in a gray atmosphere while obscure objects with missile-like movement paint the space in black smoke. The projectiles fly by the viewer in constant intervals. A strong sub-bass-drive soundtrack plays in the background, creating an ominous and eerie mood. The viewer is given limited amounts

of control, not being able to do anything but observe. This lack of control psychologically invokes a feeling of helplessness.

Using data acts as a metaphor for the human experience: the user's data (experience) is transferred from one database (physical) to another database (digital). As projectiles fly in A/DOOM, the state of physical human experience becomes both active and lost at the same time. This state is active in the sense that the objects themselves are never identified as missiles, yet the viewer recognizes the projectiles (prototypes of objects from current experience) as something that should be avoided. The fight or flight response is ignited, although there is nothing the viewer can do. Meanwhile, the state of human consciousness is lost because the viewer is contained in an environment that is unknown to the viewer's physical reality. The two realities are blended, forcing the viewer to synthesize their sense of reality with what is being confronted. As we continue to use VR and AR as simulations to depict realities (or Baudrillard's hyperreality), we integrate machine further into the human experience, falling under Haraway's idea of a cyborg.

Several small-scale exhibitions have explored the concept of human and the machine. The Transfer Gallery in New York, for instance, has dedicated itself to being a platform where experimental media artists can "explore simulation."⁸⁷ Exhibitions such as *Virtual Beings* (2019), *Transfer Download:::AI* (2019), and *Foraging the Gods* (2019) address themes that address computers, artificial intelligence, and human experience. In of the introduction to *Foraging the Gods*, Julia Kaganskiy (the curator) shared the same ideas fundamental to posthumanism:

Rather than paint a picture of some future superintelligent entity, [artists] help us better see and understand the AI that is already here, embedded in everyday mundane interactions and bureaucratic systems. These counter-narratives lend some intelligibility to otherwise opaque and incomprehensible processes that are ultimately far more insidious, and present a greater threat, than a robot uprising. They also offer up alternative ways of conceptualizing and defining intelligence, ranging from non-human intelligences, such as animal in Pinar Yoldas' *Kitty*

⁸⁷ "About," Transfer Gallery, accessed January 2020, <http://transfergallery.com/about/>.

AI and Theo Triantafyllidis' Seamless or bacterial in Jenna Sutela's *nimiia cétiï*, to collective intelligence of ancestral knowledge in Stephanie Dinkins' *Not The Only One*.⁸⁸

Narratives such as the “robot uprising” represent a prevalent fear as AI grows and is a product of anxiety about technological development. Kaganskiy mentioned the blending of intellectual boundaries between species, hinting at Haraway's human versus animal concept. Kaganskiy does not mention posthumanism; however, the connections between art and posthumanism should not be ignored.. By making these connections, this thesis makes it necessary to relate contemporary art to posthumanist theory that is otherwise left unbridged.

Haraway brought forth two broad themes underlying posthumanism: a post-anthropocentric perspective and anxiety relating to technology, or technoanxiety. By analyzing Haraway's ideas of the human and machine, I have not only identified these fundamental concepts but also expanded her ideas to fit a greater framework. Technoanxiety and the reimagining of human identities will be used in the following chapter to see how Lu Yang and Jacoby Satterwhite's works contribute to a conversation that is becoming increasingly more visible.

⁸⁸ “Foraging the Gods,” Transfer Gallery, accessed 2020, <http://transferyallery.com/forging-the-gods/>.

CHAPTER 4: Case Studies – Lu Yang & Jacolby Satterwhite

This chapter provides two case studies on the artists Lu Yang and Jacolby Satterwhite to understand the how unique themes, methods, and processes of each artist relate to the philosophical frameworks discussed previously. Both artists use digital media to create art that examines humanity's relationship with technology; however, they rely on very different theories to examine technology's impact on an individual's perception of identity. To analyze these artists' ideas, this chapter will incorporate Baudrillard's theories on simulacra from Chapter Two. Both artists embrace creating hyperrealities based on our current realities. Understanding the reason why these artists create hyperrealities shed light on their ideas about humanity. Viewing the works through a posthumanist lens, as outlined in Chapter 3, will act as a means to understand the purpose of these artists in creating hyperrealities, revealing certain perspectives on humanity and what it means to be human in the age of technology.

Lu Yang

Lu Yang is a Shanghai-based artist who specializes in using new media to create intensely colorful and outlandish films and installations, transporting viewers to videogame-like worlds. She graduated with a BA and MA from the New Media Art department of the China Academy of Art in Hongzhou. During her education, she was given artistic freedom to experiment with whatever she chose, recalling, "They didn't really teach us a lot about art—I don't think art can be taught. They just said, 'Do whatever you want, you're the best.'"⁸⁹ Her unrestricted approach to art yielded new methods, processes, and concepts that would become essential to her work.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Josh Feola, "Mindful Indulgence: Lu Yang's Art as Spiritual Entertainment," *Radii*, published November 4, 2017, <https://radiichina.com/lu-yang-interview/>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Lu Yang uses a variety of methods and media, such as 3D animation, holograms, video games, music composition, virtual reality, and augmented reality. She is interested in testing the boundaries of various media for its capabilities in content creation and content display. In Dance Dance Lu Yang Revolution (Figures 1 & 2), a performance in 2018, she appropriated the format of dance animation software, MikuMikuDance, by having a dancer equipped with motion tracking sensors perform on a stage. An animation is projected on screens showing an avatar that mimics the movements of the dancer. The avatar dances in various digital environments with the camera panning in a similar fashion to how it would in a MikuMikuDance video. In appropriating a pure digital software to create a real-life performance, Lu Yang breaks the boundary separating digital and reality. Her approach to new media is boundless.



Figure 4.1 – Dance Dance Lu Yang Revolution (2018) Live Performance



Figure 4.2 – Dance Dance Lu Yang Revolution (2018) Screen Detail

Although the previous generation of Chinese artists chased themes that dealt with politics and nationalism, Lu Yang believes that Chinese contemporary artists in her generation are not very interested in politics. In the growing age of the internet, Lu Yang, instead, chases themes that are common to human beings.⁹¹ Her works explore themes such as science, religion, psychology, neuroscience, medicine, videogames, pop culture, and music to “highlight the biological and material determinants of our condition.”⁹² In other words, Lu Yang explores concepts of what makes humans, humans.

Lu Yang became interested in these themes because of many moments in her childhood. First, she grew up in a religious household.⁹³ She recalled reading her grandmother’s books about

⁹¹ “Interview: Jin Shan and Lu Yang,” *Asia Society*, accessed April 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/texas/interview-jin-shan-and-lu-yang>.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Amy Qin, “Q. and A.: Lu Yang on Art, ‘Uterus Man’ and Living Life on the Web,” *The New York Times*, published November 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/china-art-lu-yang-venice-biennale.html>.

Buddhism, a main source of her exposure to the religion. She developed an interest in science, medicine, and the body because when she was younger, she was admitted into hospitals frequently because of her asthma.⁹⁴ Lu Yang believes that religion and science, often opposite ends on the metaphysical spectrum, are in fact connected. She asserts, “Our physical body discovers the world based on physical matter through science, while our upper mind finds the truth, maybe through some religious ideas.”⁹⁵ Her works blend these two incongruous concepts together intentionally.

She compares her interest in religion to music interests.⁹⁶ Religion is a lens through which Lu Yang sees the world, although she would argue that there is no one true way to view the world (just like there is no one right music taste). Although she believes in a universal perspective for theology, she has been influenced by her personal experiences with Buddhism growing up, thereby she gravitates more toward Buddhist ideas. She is interested in the dynamics of theologies and the stories that religions tell. Buddhist and Hinduist doctrine, especially that of reincarnation, seem to be a common theme in many of her works such as *Lu Yang Delusional Mandala* (2015) and *Lu Yang Delusional Crime and Punishment* (2016). In Buddhism and Hinduism, the reality in which we live is understood to be illusionary. Lu Yang believes, “...In a Buddhist way, ... you can live your entire life, even up to the point that you die, and not actually experience the real world.”⁹⁷

Lu Yang blends her own reality with fictitious ones that she has created, demonstrating her interests in reincarnation and illusionary worlds. *Lu Yang Delusional Mandala* (Figure 4.3) more explicitly shows Lu Yang’s understanding of a concept like reincarnation. In this work, she documents the act of being 3D-scanned to be imported into a new world explicitly, rather than suggesting it. In this way, she is showing a rebirth or transition from one form of life to a digital

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “Interview: Jin Shan and Lu Yang.”

⁹⁶ Josh Feola, “Mindful Indulgence.”

⁹⁷ Ibid.

form of life. Other works, such as *God of the Brain* (2017) (Figure 4.4), demonstrates a more fundamental understanding of reincarnation: the synthesis of existing information to create new information. In this film, Lu Yang shows a religious dance performance while traditional Sri Lankin music plays in the background. As the film progresses, animated avatars and computer-generated imagery (CGI) begin to appear and the music transitions to Sri Lankin trap music. The synthesis of both physical reality and digital reality creates a new understanding, or a birth of new environments and religious concepts.

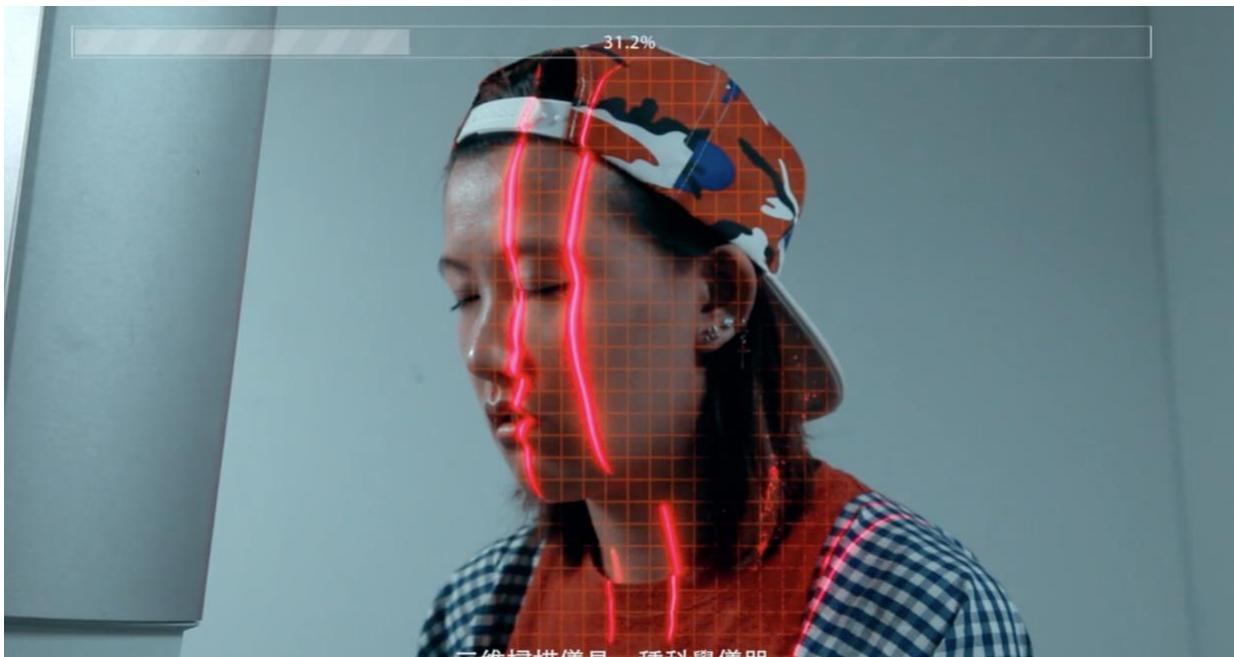


Figure 4.3 – Lu Yang *Delusional Mandala* (2015)

Many of Lu Yang's films use a variety of music genres as soundtracks. As mentioned, *God of the Brain* uses Sri Lankan music, while a work such as *Electromagnetic Brainology* (2017) (Figure 4.5) uses bass-boosted techno music with deities dancing in the background (2017). She has worked with musicians to create soundtracks in other genres such as Beijing post-core, Japanese hip-hop/pop, opera, and death metal. Even in music, Lu Yang does not shy away from

experimentation, learning and exploring different sounds that humans identify with, moving from beyond a single culture (a subset of humanity) to greater universal factors.



Figure 4.4 – God on the Brain (2017)

In the act of exploring concepts that are universal human interests, Lu Yang creates very personal works that reflect on the way she thinks of human identity and her own perception of human identity. Lu Yang wants to “live on the internet.”⁹⁸ For her, the internet is where categories that label humans can be abandoned. Throughout her career, Lu Yang has frequently been called a Chinese contemporary or feminist artist. While she does not particularly care how she is labeled, she notes a difference in the way she is treated depending on where she exhibits.⁹⁹ In Western exhibitions, she always has a tag attached to her name. For instance, she has been included in Western exhibitions entitled *We Chat: A Dialogue in Contemporary Chinese Art* (2016),

⁹⁸ Amy Qin, “Q. and A.”

⁹⁹ Josh Feola, “Mindful Indulgence.”

Chinternet Ugly (2019), and *Micro Era: Media Art from China* (2019). Chinese curators, on the other hand, do not have a tendency to identify her as Chinese or feminist. This is one of the reasons why she prefers to “live on the internet.” She declared, “By living on the Internet, you can abandon your identity, nationality, gender, and even your existence as a human being. I rather like this feeling.”¹⁰⁰ Many people who discover Lu Yang on the internet do not even know whether she is female or male (in *Lu Yang Delusional Mandala*, she presents herself as gender-ambiguous). The focus is, instead, on her work rather than categories of her identity.



Figure 4.5 – Electromagnetic Brainology (2017)

Deleuze’s societies of control provide an interesting lens for analyzing her position. By categorizing Lu Yang as a part of a group that is separate from the ingroup, she is constantly referred to and therefore conditioned to be a part of the outgroup. The internet provides Lu Yang a method of releasing herself from Western tools of control. In her case, the inevitable conditioning

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

and categorization of those who exist in the Western art canon. Although Lu Yang likes to exist on the internet to avoid categories of identity or binaries, her works indisputably concern notions of identity: gender, technology (body manipulation/enhancement), and religion.

Viewing Lu Yang's works in which she merges religious deities with cyber-aesthetics while they dance to pop music such as in *Electromagnetic Brainology*, may seem an unsettling cacophony for some. She is, however, toying with the universal principles that we use to identify human concepts. As technology is becoming more integral to humans' lives, it is hard to imagine a world without it. Likewise, concepts like religion and gender theory have developed to become integral to human experience. According to her, gender only exists in the context of society.¹⁰¹ In an online world where societies are much more difficult to distinguish and where fictional societies become reality, Lu Yang tests current perceptions of boundaries, manipulating universal principles that are used to identify humans with technology.

Although no one has proposed that Lu Yang subscribes to any posthumanist theory (she would probably not like to be labeled as such, anyway), using posthumanist concepts as tools to understand Lu Yang's ideas help uncover how the internet is changing the ways humans identify as human. For instance, highlighting universal concepts that make us human and integrating them with technology is certainly a key point in posthumanist ideology reflected in Lu Yang's works. In the internet era, she takes distinct methods of control (religion, gender binary, etc.) in distinct societies (Western and Eastern) and blends them together. She creates alternate realities where signs that have been conditioned to occupy separate spaces exist in one, essentially creating a hyperreality of simulacra.

¹⁰¹ Feola, "Mindful Indulgence."

Her works are hard to decipher, but they are not completely arbitrary. Similar to Baudrillard's example of Disney, by creating an opposite reality, one becomes more cognizant of the current reality. Thus, in creating these alternative realities, Lu Yang is making a movement to highlight our understanding of reality. Her works are not just a compilation of overstimulated morbid imagery, but rather, conceptual compositions that help us understand humanity (religion, science, technology, and psychology) and breaks down certain societies of control that separate them. Breaking down societies of control destroys the notion that certain standards must be met to be a part of the ingroup.¹⁰² Blurring the boundary between the ingroup and outgroup, Lu Yang takes a radical approach to equalizing the determinants of what makes us human.

Jacolby Satterwhite

Jacolby Satterwhite is an American artist who uses computer-generated imagery to produce virtual worlds that merge his black, queer, and personal identities with cyber-aesthetics to assimilate viewers into his own space (what he calls a lexicon). Satterwhite was born in Columbia, South Carolina, and lived in both South Carolina and Atlanta.¹⁰³ Growing up, Satterwhite spent most of his time playing videogames.¹⁰⁴ As someone who had cancer at a young age, he recalls playing videogames in the hospital while under treatment.¹⁰⁵ On one hand, his work is influenced by fantastical imagery and concepts from videogames. On the other hand, his work is very much

¹⁰² Recall that necropolitics argues that the management of who is deemed to live and who is deemed to die is embedded within politics. Necropolitics is related to societies of control because, as someone who is deemed to live, one is part of the ingroup. Someone who is part of the outgroup is deemed to die. Although Lu Yang is not explicitly commenting on necropolitics, her method to blur the boundary between the humans in ingroup and the outgroup can be seen as an approach that reconfigures dynamics in societies of control such as necropolitics.

¹⁰³ Kindness, "Interview: Kindness Explores The Sci-Fi Surrealist Paradise In Jacolby Satterwhite's Artwork," *Saint Heron*, accessed April 2020, <https://saintheron.com/interview-kindness-explores-the-sci-fi-surrealist-paradise-in-jacolby-satterwhites-artwork/>.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Bullock, "Interview: Jacolby Satterwhite on How Video Games, Art History, and Sleep Deprivation Inspire His 3D Interiors," *Pin-Up*, accessed April 2020, <https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/interview-3d-queer-artist-jacolby-satterwhite-on-video-game-environments>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

grounded in the realities of his personal life, with imagined worlds that are often populated by “avatars of artists and friends.”¹⁰⁶ Satterwhite’s worlds are a conglomerate of deeply packed layers that, deconstructed, reveal much more than just strange figures existing in a dystopic cyber-space.

Satterwhite received his BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Arts in Baltimore and his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.¹⁰⁷ For most of his education, he was trained as a painter. It was not until graduate school that he realized he was interested in 3D animation. During this time, he decided to quit painting completely and moved on to learn digital design skills using applications such as Logic 9 and Maya.¹⁰⁸ During the same period, he purchased cameras to record some of his performances.¹⁰⁹ Satterwhite has explained in multiple interviews that he felt like he had to do this because, although he pushed painting as far as he could, he could not, as a black and queer artist, “escape the 400 years of oppressive history attached to the medium.”¹¹⁰ Satterwhite was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial with his series *Reifying Desire* (2014) (Figure 6). Recently, he has collaborated with Solange, a singer and performance artist, to produce her visual album, *When I Get Home* (2019).¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ “Jacolby Satterwhite,” *Mitchell-Inness & Nash*, accessed April 2020, <https://www.miandn.com/artists/jacolby-satterwhite>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*,

¹⁰⁸ Kindness, “Interview.”

¹⁰⁹ Evan Moffitt, “Jacolby Satterwhite talks to Evan Moffitt about animation, sex and choreography,” *Frieze*, published March 11, 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/body-talk-0>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹¹ “Jacolby Satterwhite,” *Mitchell-Inness & Nash*.



Figure 4.6 – Reifying Desire (2014)



Figure 4.7 – Blessed Avenue (2018)

Like Lu Yang, Satterwhite was impacted by the environment in which he grew up. He is deeply inspired by his mother, Patricia Satterwhite. At a young age, Jacolby Satterwhite started to

notice his mother's developing mental illnesses. Eventually she had to quit her job and became a stay at home mom. During the same period, his dad also lost his job, and the Satterwhite family found themselves struggling financially. Satterwhite noted that his mother started to develop PTSD and insomniac behaviors; she would subscribe to late-night paid programs that were obviously a scam. These programs would promise her creative fame such as the chance to publish her poetry. Satterwhite said, "...In a way, she was trying to revive being in the middle class by being a creative."¹¹²

Patricia Satterwhite was compulsively interested in making art. Over the course of her life, she recorded seven albums and made over 10,000 drawings.¹¹³ She did all this without the desire for an audience.¹¹⁴ Jacolby Satterwhite would often carry his mother's drawings around as an undergraduate and create works inspired by her. Analyzing his mother's work over the course of her life, he began to think that they were about ways bodies perform in space.¹¹⁵ Many of his works feature this idea such as *Reifying Desire* or *Blessed Avenue* (Figures 4.6 and 4.7). In fact, *Reifying Desire* is an attempt to decipher many of the diagrams his mother made, most of which resemble crystalline structures. He took his mother's schema and merged it with his own form of language and ideas to create works created from the synthesis of the two.

The other main point of Satterwhite's work lies in digital creation and cyber-aesthetics. Satterwhite believes that there is a tactile process that is similar to painting when creating digital work. In the three-dimensional digital environment, Satterwhite builds and sculpts his mother's drawings, adding color and gradations to manifest a two-dimensional drawing into a three-dimensional space. To create the animations of his friends, he first records them doing a

¹¹² Kindness, "Interview."

¹¹³ Evan Moffitt, "Jacolby Satterwhite."

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

performance using a camera. From there, he imports these video into an editing software to trace key points of the body, such as the hands, frame by frame.¹¹⁶ He does this for every figure. Satterwhite spends hours tracing figures, saying that “for every single figure in [Blessed Avenue] I spent at least eight hours putting a dot on their hand, over and over...”¹¹⁷ Instead of developing attachments to the people in the videos in real life, he begins to attach himself to the figures on his screen, simulacra of these people. The boundary between real life and digital life blurs when he says, “...I traced her hand—I know that girl too well, I feel like I’m related to her, and it’s awkward when I see her because we’re not even that close...I spent 12 hours a day with these people on my computer for months and months until they feel like family.”¹¹⁸ In digitizing his characters, Satterwhite makes them nothing more than data on a hard drive. Oftentimes, these figures are left on his computer for months on end and some are not even used. Playing the role of god, Satterwhite is given the ability to determine who populates his world, and why. With this action, he is essentially deciding who is human enough to be a part of his ecosystem. This practice is an essential building block of post humanist theory.

Satterwhite is also interested in art history, pulling compositional references from proto-Renaissance, Renaissance, and High Renaissance work.¹¹⁹ What is interesting in Satterwhite’s method is his constant attention to process, methods, and language. By taking the process of painting and methods of composition from Western art historical canons, he redefines foundational formal elements in his own language. The digital medium provides Satterwhite with the tools to reconfigure what is thought of as defining characteristics of humanity, using his own personal and collective identities.

¹¹⁶ Michael Bullock, “Interview.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Satterwhite mentions that phenomenology is an important concept for understanding his works.¹²⁰ By inviting the viewer into his space, he forces them to assimilate what he calls a new lexicon. This lexicon is constructed by learning and grasping the essence of his mother's works and combining them with new elements dealing with his queer and black identities. In *Reifying Desire 6*, Satterwhite makes this symbolism clear. In this animation, amongst other distinct visual elements, Satterwhite shows CGI of him having sexual intercourse with a porn star, Antonio Biaggi, in a Bodhi-like tree. This action symbolizes the production of a new binary code: "The egg I lay hatches a new human language that metastasizes until it's out of control."¹²¹

In these worlds, he uses phenomenology to create what he refers to as a new lexicon, thereby examining the relationship between our current experiences of reality and the perception of signs. *Blessed Avenue* (Figure 7) is a 3D animation in which space and time seems to have basis in the physics of reality. Figures were filmed on a greenscreen and then integrated into the space. Many movements are inspired by queer mannerisms or culture such as light BDSM and voguing, a dance style originating from the black queer community. Other figures are computer-generated. Many figures and objects exist in a bubble-like space. Architectural elements are built using inexplicable materials. On the outside of the 'bubble' are other large cyborg-like figures and objects. For instance, there is a large Pegasus with cyber-aesthetic wings and an indescribable figure riding it. The camera pans around the space showing that some figures are floating while other figures are grounded on objects. The film continues similarly with some figures that disappear while new figures populate the space. The mood becomes substantially darker in the later part of the film when red particles begin to ooze out of figures' bodies.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Evan Moffitt, "Jacolby Satterwhite."

In this work, Satterwhite carefully crafts digital space in a language developed from his identity. He reimagines identifiers of humanity as a whole by appropriating the fundamentals of traditional artistic production—such as perspective and the tactile process of painting—and incorporating it into the digital creation process with themes such as queerness and blackness. He creates a hyperreality in which signs and meaning from our current reality shifts and blends when brought into the digital space. While Baudrillard certainly warned us of the dangers of loss in meaning through screens, Satterwhite seems to embrace this loss as a foundation for creating new meaning. In this way, his practice is most similar to Haraway's reason to make a cyborg the main protagonist of her essay: using technology and simulacra as a means of blurring the boundaries between human, machine, and human identity. Similar to Lu Yang, Satterwhite takes humanistic concepts (race, sexuality, and psychology) and transforms them in a digital space with no origin story. He subverts and toys with our current understanding of reality created by the Western white male, thereby reexamining humanity in general.

While both artists utilize technology as a medium and subject matter in which to examine humanity, Lu Yang has not provided details of her personal life or communicated how it has impacted her works. In contrast, Satterwhite openly describes how his experiences with his mother inspired his desire to imagine a world full of her essences, in addition to his experiences being black and queer. Between these two artists, there is an interesting dynamic between using digital media to either escape from binaries of identity or reaffirm and reclaim identity. Whereas Lu Yang used technology to devoid herself of specific characteristics of identity such as race and gender, Satterwhite used technology to reclaim his identity, producing virtual worlds that act as archives of his experiences. While Deleuze hinted at technology as a possible society of control, artists such as Lu Yang and Satterwhite are using technology as a means to break from societies of control. In

the process, they have used signs and signifiers of the current reality to create hyperrealities full of simulacra to examine and question qualities of what makes us human.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed three essential concepts (simulation and simulacra, societies of control, and posthumanism) in my thesis to analyze new media works by Lu Yang and Jacolby Satterwhite, in an attempt to explain the anxiety that one feels when thinking about technology's relationships with humans. The method common to these artists is the creation digital worlds intentionally filled with simulacra to synthesize distinct societies of control. By using technology as a concept and a vehicle to bring together concepts that have been conditioned as the outgroup to the ingroup, these works create a cognitive dissonance that leads to technoanxiety. Blurring the boundaries between the ingroup and outgroup, both artists take a radical approach to equalizing the determinants of what makes us human, thereby decentering the Western white male as the center of the universe.

There have been many debates, as seen with Baudrillard and Haraway's ideas, about whether the proliferation of technological media is a negative or positive variable for the constantly evolving human identity. Baudrillard argues that media technology contributes to a loss of meaning since society becomes complacent and desensitized to information presented through screens. Haraway on the other hand, argued for simulacra as a vehicle for posthumanist thought: an opportunity for society to reconsider human identity. Others in posthumanist studies, such as Achille Mbembe and Rosi Braidotti, elucidate the potential for technology to contribute to societies of control such as nuclear/robotic warfare used for necropolitics. It is not a point in this thesis to argue for one future or the other, but rather present the many different viewpoints on the fact of the matter so a framework can be created and provide a new perspective on reasons behind many works by contemporary new media artists. Artists such as Andrew Thomas Huang, Tian Xiaolei, Ed Atkins, Eva Papamargariti, Lu Yang, and Jacolby Satterwhite contribute to an

increasing trend in new media, which—considered in the context of the philosophy examined here, presents a fascinating perspective on human identity.

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