

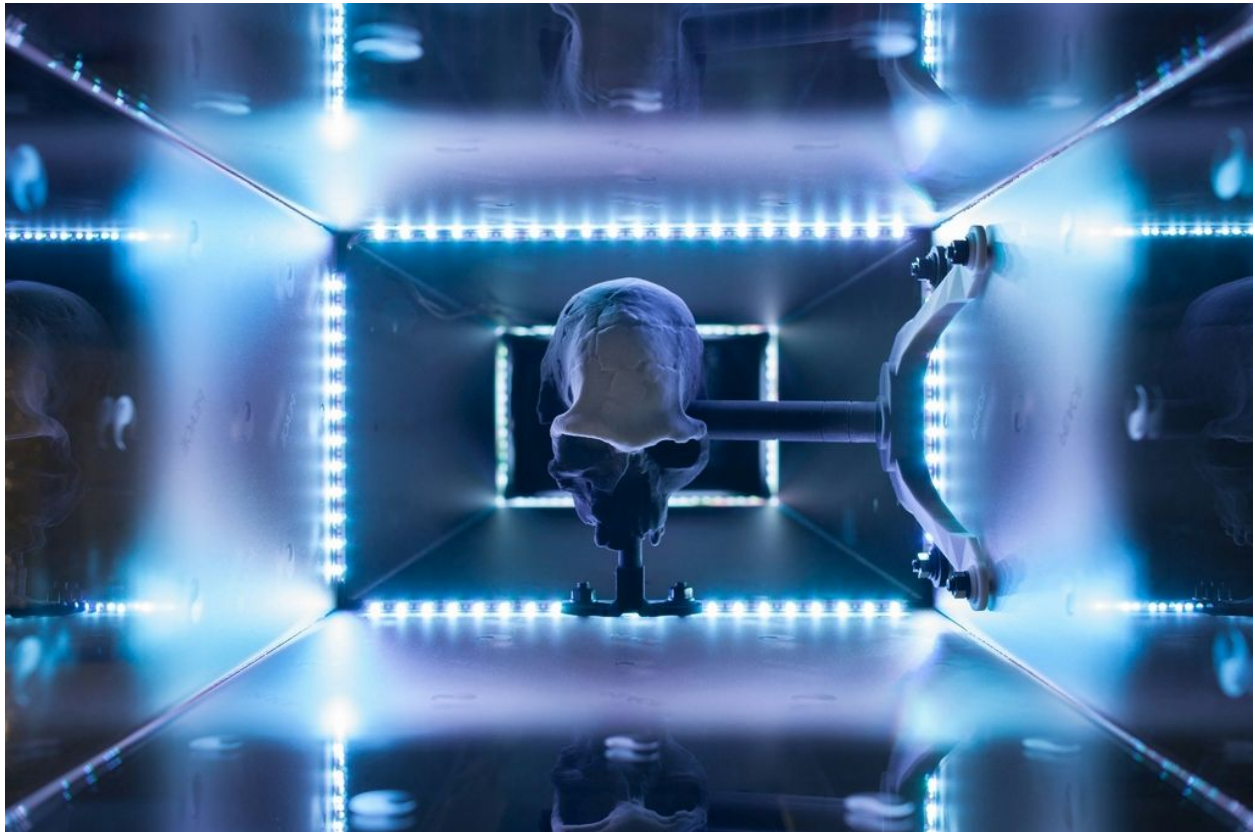
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Media Performance: History, Theory and Contemporary Practice

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The Unrealized Dream of the Cyborg: Post-Internet Art's Compensation



At the beginning of the 20th century the discovery and application of technology inspired some of humanity's wildest fantasies. After the discovery of the machine--filled with functional, palpable electronic parts--the bounds of our evolution and what these machines might do in its favor seemed endless. Suddenly there was much discussion of the technological body--a variant of the human being in its final, perfected form. However as time progressed and our familiarity with technology's benefits and limits grew, our utopian visions of the optimal human being

assisted by technological wonders began to fade. We soon recognized the futility of our idealized plans, becoming disillusioned to technology's alleged benefits. And thus began our fall from grace. Our dream to become the ultimate human being--one that maintains sentience while eliminating the body's expiration date--failed to be realized. As a result, still unable to fully admit that such a goal was unachievable, we desperately clung to any semblance of our original hope for the technological body through various platforms predominantly located on the web. Many have come to project themselves and their ideal onto the web in hopes of compensation. Post-internet artists in particular have channeled such disappointment and pessimism into their work, using the internet and technology as a medium for decentralized, ubiquitous and disseminated work. The desire for a human being that maintains knowledge without depending on a body has given rise to a new form of art: art with no body. Post-internet art is essentially art with no body. It is art with fluid, and boundless content. It is humanity's dream to become an immortal, unexpirable vessel of knowledge aestheticized and then translated into art. Much of this notion can be explored through the work of artists Timur Si-Qi and Katja Novitskova' in reference to artist Stelarc and philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard.

The notion of the cyborg, of the harmonious melding of the human being and the robotic, was prevalent at the start of the technological revolution. Many imagined the cyborg to be the cold, fast, hard renewal of the human being, relinquishing the human of its emotional inconsistencies and physical limitations. In his article "Prosthetics, Robotics and Remote Existence: Postevolutionary Strategies," Stelarc describes the transformation of the natural body into the robotic one: "The body performs in a structured and interactive lighting installation...reacting to electrical discharges...The performance is a choreography of controlled,

constrained and involuntary motions...of human function and machine enhancement” (Stelarc 592). Here, he re-envisioned the body as the ultimate carrier of thought and knowledge exempt from its vulnerabilities--exempt from its “softness” and “lack of modular design.” It is the ultimate dream: the human evolving into its impenetrable form no longer at the mercy of its own body. It would seem that both Lyotard and Stelarc imagined this evolved human to inhabit outer space, a task incomprehensible for humanity in its then current state. Stelarc describes the necessity of the use of technology for such inhabitancy to occur claiming that “Extraterrestrial environment amplify the body’s obsolescence, intensifying pressure for its reengineering” (Stelarc 592). Likewise, Lyotard advocates for technology’s help in enabling the human to exist outside the earth’s atmosphere imagining the inevitable end of the sun and thus human life should technology fail to modify or eliminate our physical bodies. The cyborg as the vision of the all-powerful and impenetrable form of the human being was finally within reach, or so it seemed.

With respect to Lyotard, the cyborg was the answer to the central question of his article “The In-human.” Lyotard ruminates over humanity’s impending doom at the explosion of the sun, should the species remain completely organic. He questions whether or not thought can go on without the body so that it may exist in outer space after the explosion. The cyborg is essentially the lifeform which maintains knowledge with no body. According to Lyotard this lifeform, if achieved, shall benefit our survival and also serve us in another matter: it will end the suffering of knowledge. Knowledge, he explains, is suffering. It is the state of emptiness- of separation from the whole. Ironically, thought serves the purpose of attempting to fill this gap while also requiring it to continue. Thus, it exists to relinquish suffering while requiring it to

maintain itself. Naturally, we are opposed to suffering and thus we are prompted to utilize thought to lessen our burden. We depend on knowledge (obtained from thought) and desire to keep it while also desiring to return to the whole to cease our sufferings. Death, arguably, is the return to this whole. We fear death so vehemently because of its threat to knowledge. If we die we return to the whole, and thus the emptiness required to produce thought and knowledge is no longer. With the expiration of our bodies knowledge will simply disappear, a fear deeply instilled within all of us. To rephrase, Lyotard's question, 'can thought exist without a body?' is really asking 'can we become whole without sacrificing thought?' 'How do we continue to think in outer space, after the solar explosion, after our demise?' all three of which boil down to the same question: How can we still think after death? The answer: as cyborgs. Our living, breathing body will be replaced by a technological one. We will cease to be living, organic things in exchange for robotic prosthetics and invincibility. Our bodies will be dead, but our minds will be--not alive--but active. The cyborg represents our deep, paradoxical desire to have both death and knowledge at the same time, and, at the beginning of the technological revolution, seemed to be the way to achieve it.

As technology progressed so did our familiarity with it. It soon became clear that all of our fantasies were perhaps unfounded and that technology, though a fascinating tool, could not unify death and knowledge. We began to recognize technology's limits and our own limits as beneficiary's of technology therein. Suddenly the utopian dream of the impenetrable human was once again beyond reach. Dismayed, much of Western culture responded to this disappointment with cynicism, abstraction and complete dissociation, aka. Post-modernism. Some still clung to the ideal, attempting to manipulate technologies so that they resembled the hope and the future

that was sought from them in the past. In an essay called “Virtual Bodies”, the author writes: “The virtual body is an inherently theatrical entity, and there is an enormous amount of suspension of disbelief going on in relation to it...There is no disembodiment, images are still just images, virtual worlds are still clunky, and the web is still primarily a lot of Web pages rather than Neuromancer-style, high-adrenaline, mind-blowing cyberspace of swimming databodies.” The web, it seems, is one of the most impressive forms of technology and through its virtual interface allows for a certain transformation of its users. The virtual body was no cyborg but it was close. It still created a being that could retain its consciousness while not actually living. As a result, many projected themselves and the unfulfilled desire to become the cyborg onto the internet at some futile attempt to live out the once-possible but now hopeless dream of the techno-body.

Artists caught on to this trend and began mimicking such projections with their work. They projected their disappointment and pessimism onto the new medium of the web, calling forth a new genre of art: the post-internet. The work produced by the post-internet artists is a manifestation of the frustration and failure surrounding the disappointments of technology. It is, as stated by writer Gene McHugh when the internet is ‘less a novelty and more a banality’.” Such works lack ownership, center, and origin. Their content remains a fluid and flexible confluence of media like the internet itself. Each individual work’s subject is often hard to discern as the internet’s content is so vast and intertwined that determining one idea behind the work is often reductive. In “The Image Object Post-Internet” by Artie Vierkant, he describes Post-internet’s ambiguity, stating that “First, nothing is in a fixed state: ie everything is anything else, whether because any object is capable of becoming another type of object or because an

object already exists in flux between multiple instantiations” (Vierkant 2). Internet art is incredibly mutable. In its mutability, ubiquitous authorship and dissemination, post-internet art becomes an art form with no body. Post-internet art has taken the dream to become a cyborg--to obtain knowledge with no body--and has projected it onto art creating art with no body. It reflects all of our pessimism and our overwhelming sense of resignation while maintaining an inkling of hope by mimicking the dream. Perhaps it could even be seen as a coping mechanism, a way to fool ourselves into thinking that the acquisition of the status of a cyborg is still possible. It attempts to simulate a failed transformation on a smaller scale, perhaps softening the blow or breaking the fall.

Post-internet artists such as artist Timur Si-Qi and Katja Novitskova embody the tendency to produce pessimistic, ironic works with little to no body or center. In their exhibition at Bard’s Curatorial Center, the rooms are filled with what appear to commercial stock-images, consumer products and elements from mass-media culture such as video games or fashion staples. The body of work could be described as having no center in terms of medium. It ranges from photographic 2D images circumposed onto 3D sculptures to unaltered everyday objects placed in serene and bizarre environments. Each individual work appears rather vapid in its overt and direct reference to how we experience popular culture on the web. It seems as though Timur Si-Qin and Katja Novitskova are attempting to simulate our experience of consumerism on the internet. The work is performing in physical space as the internet. In its wide range of medium, in the difficulty one has in distinguishing one separate work from another, one concept from another, Timur Si-Qin’s and Katja Novitskova’s work ceases to have body. It has no focal point as its focal point is the internet which focuses on everything and nothing at the same time. A

reference to death and its ability to retain consciousness can be found in certain works such as “Untitled” (above), a work displaying an illuminated skull attached by a pole that extends through both ends in what appears to be a lead box with LEDs surrounding it. It is still the internet, entertaining and whole, but its organic structure has deteriorated. Such conceptual work with transitory concept is the representation of death and knowledge in one. As post-internet artists, Timur Si-Qi and Katja Novitskova, are channeling the cynicism of the masses as flaws in technology become more and more apparent. They produce works composed of several disparate elements, all unified under one virtual umbrella. The virtual umbrella, however, does not have physical body, nor does it have solidified content, thus such art produced under this umbrella (the web) has no body. Still, even within its ambiguity, the art still holds conceptual content and thus post-internet artists are able to inject our dreams of our technological evolution into works of art with no body.

With the first machines, prosthetics and even robots, the promises of technology seemed boundless. However, as our use and explorations of technology developed, the initial awe and excitement surrounding technology began to fade. Technology is becoming an ordinary tool. We can no longer fool ourselves with the idea of the complete transformation of the species. Our hope has diminished into bitter cynicism showing itself in many of the principles of post-modernity. The Post-internet artist, a section of post-modern culture observing these trends, projects such behaviors and disappointment onto their work. Since we, as a species, cannot achieve the status of retaining knowledge with no physical body, we hopelessly simulate our experience through virtual reality, projecting our psyches onto the digital, bodiless, world. The post-internet artist capitalizes on this, creating a new form of art with no body and no center.

Post-internet art is the representation of the dream of a limitless, bodiless entity that will never be reached. It channels dreams like Marinetti's of "This nonhuman, mechanical species, built for constant speed, (that) will be quite naturally cruel and warlike," understanding that it shall be forever unrealized--forever organic, slow, kind, and gentle.