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Posthuman Body and Visuality: Local and Virtual Interface in New Media Art

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Abstract

The term "posthuman" is used to characterise ways of existence brought about by hypothetical improvements to human nature brought about by technical and applied scientific advancements. It also denotes the decentering of human uniqueness and the triumph of humanistic ideas. The posthuman condition is an opportunity to restore the balance between humans and nonhumans, advance horizontal ontologies, expand the boundaries of ethics, and extend rational mastery, surmounting humanity's biological limitations. Hypervisuality of the images situates the body as an instrument and a site for the local, global and virtual interplays of online global audiences and offline located/situated producers and consumers. This paper will study the concept of the posthuman body and visuality in the context of current art practices. It will analyse the shift new media brings in the concept of body from painting, and sculpture to the new media artworks.

Keywords: Posthuman body, Visuality, Visuality of Body, New Media Art

Posthuman Body and Visuality

Art history studies are predicated on seeing as a physical act of vision and visuality. According to some, the scopic regime equated seeing with knowing. It eventually became linked to visibility, identity, and gaze debate. Later, the discussion surrounding the representation of various visuality concepts included Derrida's concept of the "Right to see." These ideas destroyed the aspect of seeing the truth. Deconstructing the pictures produced as a result of visual experiences helped to develop the discourse. Despite being equally visual-centric, this modern discourse went beyond the heroic visualisation of history to create visuality discourse.

The proliferation of digital media transformed the relationship between the object's materiality and its representation. Through interactivity, non-linearity, and immateriality, new media art challenges the object-centred understanding of art. New Media art has explored the agency of material objects and the particularities of digital media and questioned the representations' notions. It represents a simulated visuality of the body.

New Media art takes further into representations, as it is no longer needed to keep the world in the "mind's eye" but build it walk through it and manipulate it. Griselda Pollock mentions it as a shift from reproducibility to producibility. (Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock) Thus it addresses digital media as an aesthetic experience. The influence of information in its materiality and how its physical features are mobilised as resources to produce meaning are also documented in new

media artworks and embodied art forms. Art serves as a bridge between the human body, other works of art, and various mediums in this way. Do human projections and the mystification of computer functioning result in the creation of cultural imagery? Does digital subjectivity possess human-like intentions, objectives, and tactics? How does computational mediation in visual storytelling reframe embodied memories and posthuman realities through the visuality of the body?

New media technologies rapidly altered the body's predominant visuality in visual culture and the arts. It demonstrated how the body simultaneously functions as a site of effect and a source of resistance to the notion of postmodernism's universal standards. The imitation of the natural immortal body is meant by representations of the body in pre-modern and contemporary contexts, which can have a variety of metaphorical connotations that are influenced by period, style, and frame. Later, these were called into question by the ideas of the fragmented body and gaze. The concept of the body in digital and virtual media emphasises how the gaze of others influences how one observes oneself and how one's body is monitored.

The widespread presence of visual media offers views of the world in visuals; they render the world in visual terms. These renderings are not innocent, but they interpret the world, present a worldview, and represent it. The theoretical positions analyse and contextualise the image's meaning, body, vision, and visuality. Vision is what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing, and visuality refers to how vision is constructed in various ways: 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein' (Foster; Foster).ⁱⁱ Visuality and other terms of scopic regime refer to how what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed.

In the book *Vision and Visuality*, Hal Foster states that vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality suggests sight as a social fact. The two are not opposed to nature to culture: vision is social and historical, and visuality involves the body and the psyche.

While discussing the pictorial shift, WJ T Mitchell calls these new visual images a post-linguistic, post-semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realisation that 'spectatorship', that is, the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure, maybe as serious a problem as various forms of 'reading' that are decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc. and that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be entirely explicable on the model of textuality.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this way, artistic meaning is understood as enacted through interpretive engagements that are themselves performative in their intersubjectivity. Thus, the artwork is no longer a static object with a single, prescribed signification communicated unproblematically to the knowledgeable, universalised viewer. Instead, contemporary visual art and theory have underlined the artist (as the first 'viewer' of the work), and subsequent viewers are caught up within the complex representation operations—entangled in intersubjective spaces of desire and projection and identification. Both artist and interpreter are imbricated within any potential determinations of meaning as classed, raced, sexed, and gendered and embodied subjects.

Visual cultural studies have observed that the visuality and the visual technology mediations are of a larger social project in which the subjectivity of individuals is reconfiguring. British art historian Norman Bryson (1988) writes, "Between subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, *that cultural construct*, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience".^{iv} Thus, the visuality is configured through the discourses that capture the vision and the technologies employed. This reconfiguration enables the person/ artist to develop different tools for the reception and transmission of other expressions and experiences. This results in the simulation of reality, spaces and subjectivity. However, as meaning is negotiated between and across subjects through language, it is understood as a negotiated domain, in flux and contingent on social and personal investments and contexts. Thus the interpretation itself is worked out as a performance between artists and spectators.

Visuality constructed through different technologies like television, films, and print media became a significant concern of scholars. Through their writings, scholars discussed the impact of external visual technologies on the socio-cultural level and a total reconfiguration of the interiority of persons. This reconfiguration necessitates the individual to develop different modalities to mediate through a new visual culture which may be seen as a product of media technologies.

With the advent of new media, the dominance of visual media over the oral or textual press, the growing tendency to visualise things that are not themselves visible is getting prominent and becoming one of the most striking features of the new visual culture. Although imaging or visualising remains the primary modality for configuring ideas, with the new technologies and cultural practices, the whole process of visuality acquires a new meaning. With the development of digital technology, visuality is seen as a practice of giving the raw, mathematical sequences of code in databases with anthropologically and culturally accepted forms that are like psychology, concepts of perception, and visual semiotics, thus relating them to familiar elements of the traditional visual culture like cinema, television, what Manovich termed as 'new visual environment'.^v This aspect raises questions about the concept of the body and related visuality.

The computerisation of culture leads to the emergence of new cultural forms, such as computer games and virtual worlds; it redefines existing ones, such as photography and cinema. Analogue image-making uses specific methods of reproducing an image of something external but has also been theorised to contain through its doubly indexical function of connection and indication. Trinh T. Minh-ha, while discussing —' the digital film event' creates a practice within which to inscribe its critical self-reflexivity about its specific modes of producing imagery, forms of proposed spectatorship and, crucially, relations to time through the specificity of digital imaging. Classic film-theorising about cinema—the moving image—as an apparatus reminds us that cinema offers but an illusion of movement. Stills, still photographic images, run through the recording camera or projector's 'gate' at the rate of twenty-four frames per second to reproduce the effect of human movement. However, digital cinema has no such thing as a still image, no punctual moment. There is only a consistent process of becoming based on the binary sequencing of zeros and ones that creates a constant relay of appearing and vanishing, of presence and absence.

As the discourse on visual technologies, practices, and New Media Art is in constant flux, the understanding of New Media Art and its affiliated genres is constantly shifting, creating a question regarding the aesthetical possibilities and their impact on the visuality of the body.

New Media art projects incorporate new technologies, refer to scientific and industrial research, and recontextualise them in art history, socio-political and cultural milieu. This can be observed in the works of artists like Jeffrey Shaw, Mona Hatoum, Cao Fei, Hans Hacke, Jenny Holzer, and Hu Jieming, as they bring in their political concerns and socio-cultural issues.

The involvement of new technologies and art practices affected New Media art's aesthetical and compositional aspects. Like the new avant-garde of the 1920s, New Media art uses appropriation as a creative tool. New media technologies such as the web and file-sharing networks gave artists easy access to found images, sounds, texts, and other media. This hyper abundance of source material, combined with the ubiquitous "copy" and "paste" features of computer software, further eroded the notion that creating something from scratch is better than borrowing it. It challenged the modern concept of originality, and appropriation became an increasingly crucial artistic strategy.

Many New Media artists consciously reflect art history in their work, reinterpreting or updating projects from the 1960s and 1970s in the context of a new technological environment. MTAA's *OnKawaraUpdate* (2001), for example, uses a software program to mimic the concept and aesthetic of Conceptual artist On Kawara's date paintings. In *Empire 24/7*, Wolfgang Staehle uses a live Web camera projection to remake Andy Warhol's *Empire*, an eight-hour-long film of the Empire State Building. John F. Simon, Jr. revisits Paul Klee's experimental use of the Cartesian grid in *Every Icon*. And Jennifer and Kevin McCoy use databases to reinterpret films in such projects as *201: A Space Algorithm*, their version of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Along with a penchant for collaboration and a marked tendency to appropriate rather than to create from scratch, this media-archaeological approach to art-making exemplifies the attenuation of authorial originality in New Media art. (Tribe 2009)

New Media art applies conventional artistic and digital tools to represent. New media art includes multimedia artwork through these tools by mixing text, video, photographs, graphics, drawings, and sound. Moreover, new media technologies have also made it possible to create different versions of the same art projects, such as interactive, non-interactive, video or web versions. This breaks down the link between the identity of an art object with its medium. Thus, the old tradition of identifying distinct art practices is substituted with new technologies based on the materials used.

New Media art continues appropriating the concept of Parody, Montage and the idea that a complex visual expression can be constructed from simple visual elements whose psychological effects are known from the new avant-garde movements of the 1920s. A theory of visual meaning and emotional impact grounded in Gestalt psychology has become the technological basis of all communication. A digital image consists of pixels, making it possible to generate images automatically and manipulate them in numerous ways and, through compression techniques, transmit them more economically.

New Media Art uses both types of montaging techniques introduced by the Constructivist movement in the 1920s. These are temporal montage and montage within a shot. In the temporal montage, images of different realities follow each other in time, while in the montage within the shot, these different realities co-exist on the screen. The new media art through hypermedia, databases, search engines, data mining, image processing, visualisation, simulation access, and manipulating existing images similar to montaging takes further into representations, as it is no longer needed to keep the world in the "mind's eye" but build it walk through it and manipulate it. Thus it addresses digital media as an aesthetic experience. It furnishes a rich resource for encountering the digital age anew through various textual and sensory forms intrinsic to and critically engaged with digital technologies and culture

The Renaissance period metaphor of the window as a conical concept of vision persists in the digital age, most obviously in the title of Microsoft's famous operating system, Windows. But, besides the names, there is no similarity between both concepts. The digital window is very different from the windows of the Renaissance perspective or the cinema screen. The Renaissance window metaphor is a tool to look through, whereas the digital window concept is to look at.

The New Media art aesthetics is not concerned with seeing or representing the world in new ways but rather with accessing and using previously accumulated media. In this respect, Lev Manovich terms new media as post-media or meta-media, as it uses old media as its primary material. It is the new computer-based media access, generation, manipulation, and analysis technique. Forms remain the same, but how these forms are used changes radically. This practice develops a discourse on what is real and ideal in image-making and the historiography of the body in art.

New Media art projects explore the performative aspect of the media and challenge the inherited understandings of the body's place in a technological culture. For instance, Australian artist Stelarc investigated the boundaries of human/machine interaction in his works *Stomach Sculpture* (1993) and *Ping Body An Internet Actuated and Uploaded Performance* (1996) by connecting his body to various media, the web, and other technologies. He continues his research into the posthuman body with the *Ping Body* by clicking his neuromuscular system to the internet's pulse of information. Pings act as the sonar of the internet, sending out signals and returning with the reaction time between nearby and far-flung nodes. Projects like this in new media art change the idea of the body.

As humans discover ways to upload their minds into computers and abandon their bodies, Hans Moravec refers to this as the "postbiological" future, where the assumption that the material embodiment has always served to define the bounds of the human would become optional.^{vi} Katherine Hayle further discusses the evolution of new and more advanced posthumans. She claims that a particular facet of posthuman rhetoric, insofar as it equated the self with the mind and viewed the body as only a vehicle for the mind's activities, continues to reenact the disembodiment that was a vital component of the liberal tradition. Zizek also discusses in similar terms while writing about the Deleuzian concept virtual body. He relates it to the art practice of Jackson Pollock, where the disembodied pure impersonal, unconscious energy is transformed in his artworks (Zizek).^{vii}

These authors discuss how the contrast between embodiment and disembodiment has fractured into more complex and varied formations. So a binary view that juxtaposes disembodied

information with an embodied human life-world is no longer sufficient to account for these complexities.

Katherine Hayle stresses that the repositioning of materiality is distinct from physicality and re-envisioning the material basis for hybrid texts and subjectivities (Hayles). She also reiterates that the binary opposition between embodiment and information engaging with the materiality of literary texts broadens and deepens ideas into computation and textuality. Materiality for her is an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies. She positions materiality as a junction between physical reality and human intention. Thus she relates Mother Nature with Motherboard. Nature, seen in earlier times as the source of human behaviour and physical reality, is now replaced by the Universal Computer.

New Media art discourse concentrates on how the mystification of actual computer operation and anthropomorphic projections create a cultural Imaginary in which digital subjects are understood as autonomous creatures imbued with human-like motives, goals, and strategies. Thus, the "digital subjects" bring forth a dialectical positioning of humans and artificial creatures with each other and hybrid subjectivity.

Making, storing, and transmitting are related to the information and the body of the subject and text. As Stelarc's work refers to the artworks and artists' subjectivity, digital subjects are articulated by analysing the effects of these modalities on their bodies. As an embodied art form, New media artworks register the impact of information in its materiality and how its physical characteristics are mobilised as resources to create meaning. This way, artwork intermediates between the body, artwork and different forms of media.

New Media Art in India

In India, the story of new media art is only a couple of decades old. In the early 1990s, Indian artists started exploring other ephemeral art practices like installations, performance art, video art, and other digital image-making art practices. Johan Pijnappel, a Dutch art historian specialising in new media art in Asia, relates globalisation and religious hyper-nationalism to the Indian artist's need to move beyond the painted image to reach a larger audience. The emerging technoscape of the 1990s and its associated social milieu influenced artists who chose to work with new media.

In the 1990s, Indian new media artists worked between media, at interfaces between shadow installations and video (Nalini Malani), video and sculpture (Vivan Sundaram and Sheba Chhachhi), video animation (Navjot and Manjunath Kamath), the internet and painting (Baiju Parthan), painting and video (Ranbir Kaleka), and in performance-based video art and installations (Subodh Gupta, Shilpa Gupta, Kiran Subbaiah and Tejal Shah). Moreover, in the 1990s, the artist groups like Raqs media collective, Thukral and Tagra and Desire Machine extended these new media art practices to digital and virtual explorations.

Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) based in New Delhi, founded in 1992. It has been evident on the international art scene for two decades. They create art and films, curate exhibitions, edit books, stage events, collaborate with architects, computer programmers, writers and theatre directors, and discover processes that profoundly

impact India's contemporary culture. Raqs follows its self-declared imperative of 'kinetic contemplation' to produce an in terms of the forms and methods it deploys even as it achieves a consistency of speculative procedures.

Raqs Media Collective collaborates to produce intelligent, poignant works, including multimedia installations, individual sculptures, online projects, and performances. These artworks critically investigate the issues related to identity, urban development, modernisation, and forms of power. Their work is founded on "Raqs," the state of kinetic contemplation achieved by Whirling Dervishes. *Lost New Shoes* (2005), a multimedia installation centred around a pile of 100 pairs of new shoes as metonyms for the human beings who might have worn them and their precarious journeys through life.

Thukral & Tagra work on new formats of public engagement and attempt to expand the scope of what art can do, further emphasising what the practice can do in a virtual context through their archives and publications. They break out of the mediated-disciplinary world to create multi-modal sensory and storytelling in immersive environments.

Their earlier work dealt with tropes of migration, mythological narratives, symbols of Indian identity, and motifs of a globally manifested consumer culture that enlivened a largely pedantic and static area of cultural material. Recently, they sought to identify the practice as pedagogy through their collaborative Pollinator.io – Interdisciplinary lab, which cultivates an inclusive learning ecosystem that indexes to achieve knowledge sharing through cross-pollination.

Desire Machine Collective was established in India in 2004 by Mriganka Madhukaillya and Sonal Jain. They create films, video, photography, and sound and multimedia installations that consider space and time, particularly human habitation, natural environments and their occupation. Their film *Residue* reflects on constructed signs that can never be replicated or remembered and the relationship between matter and memory. Near to the vision of an abandoned temple or a monument in ruins, nature and industry intermingle here. Without an explicit documentary statement, *Residue* is an experimental film, a stroll through a dream world incorporating both the universe of the mechanical, human and natural, as when a machine morphs into a butterfly or power meters indicate depleted figures.

Periphery is Desire Machine Collective's foray into the notion of space and takes the modes of working with collaborative and hybrid practices further. It has the scope of being more participatory and inclusive of multiplicities than a conventional studio space. It pushes for experimentation and extends the limits of our practice and other practitioners. It was the creation of a space for experimentation and cross-disciplinary practices. It also occupies a liminal space and in-between—land and water, urban and rural. It draws from Manuel Castells, who describes the modern world as a 'space of flows—flows of people, capital, information, technology, images, sounds and symbols.'

Bengaluru-based Raghava KK, another flag bearer of tech-infused art, recently debuted on the gram with a performance piece titled *Eye Candy*, made in collaboration with youth brand Under25. The artist-designer, who has used iPads and robots to create art in the past, also curated India's first AI art show in 2018 with his brother and economist Karthik Kalyanaraman. In 2020 he presented an AI artwork in collaboration with artist Harshit Agrawal at Italy's contemporary art

fair, Artissima. For this, they crowdsourced line figures of males and females. Then these drawings were fed to the AI and what we get are installations that create a discourse about gender identities. Raghava KK considers AI a new transcendence tool which can potentially blur the binaries between the physical and digital. Raghava is keen to understand how biohacking can be used in art creation.

Raghava has also experimented with EEG headsets that use brain waves to bring new, dynamic perspectives into his work. His works include *Mona Lisa 2.0*, whose face changes based on Raghava's mood; a depiction of Gandhi that varies based on whether you agree or disagree with him; a red artwork that uses brainwaves to see every shade between red and blue; and *Venus 2.0*, who you can choose to cover up or uncensored.



Figure 1: Raghav K K *Venus 2.0*



Figure 2: Raghav K K *La Petit Mort 2021*

Harshit Agrawal is an artificial intelligence and new media artist. He explores what he calls the 'human-machine creativity continuum'- the melding of human and machine creative agency through his practice. He uses machines and algorithms and often creates them. He believes that AI is challenging us to question many of our preconceived notions, creating art with data that reflects societal perceptions in their true essence rather than an individual reading of it.

He has worked with AI art since its inception in 2015. His work has been nominated twice for the top tech art prize, the 'Lumen', and he was the only Indian artist at the first global group exhibition of AI art at a contemporary gallery in 2018. Initial examples of AI art were mainly to create hauntingly familiar yet alien forms. As a visual artist working with AI, he works with many images as data that the machine trains on and then produces new images representing that data set. The process is much more involved in terms of how this artist created, and it is in the training process that a lot of subtle variations lie where the craft of the human artist comes into play and also in terms of what data set they choose to work with and how they collect the data set. In this new art form, he experiments with various media via visual, sculptural, and text-based AI creation.

As an artist, he looks at technology beyond its transactional, efficiency and economic purposes to its emotional, relationship perspective that we humans need to build with it. He relates new media artworks to the human artist. He stresses that the artist in these artworks is a human being, not an AI. The intentionality in artworks is due to the artist, not because of AI. As he puts in an interview, "I tell the AI what it needs to train on, and I decide how it trains on the data that I set to train on. I define the process exactly and ultimately choose the outputs from AI that I call art".

He mentions that the AI artist governs the whole process; the artist visualises the outcome and embraces the machine's influence and training process. Whether to include the influences or not are also the artist's choice, similar to the traditional painting on canvas. Artist chooses data sets, themes, and visual aspects of training that they want to work with, like any visual artist. The difference is that AI has a more mysterious nature of influence because the neural network, which is the training process, has millions of parameters humans cannot get to the bottom of every bit of it. So that level of abstraction results in a slightly more organic influence by the machine.



Figure 3: Harshit Agrawal *Masked Reality*



Figure 4: Harshit Agrawal *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Algorithm*

Many young artists like Karan Kalra, a Delhi-based multidisciplinary visual artist heavily influenced by science fiction in my work, have a deep-seated fascination for interstellar space. He also visualises the embodied world in his works and tells stories about Delhi. Ravi Koranga is another young artist from Bangalore who explores satirical and fun-loving images to examine real-life experiences. Finally, Udipi-based architect and artist Shreya Daffney represent the local people and culture through digitalised simulated images.



Figure 5: Karan Kalra *Skygazer*



Figure 6: Shreya Daffney

In these new media artworks, artists have visualised technologies to embody social, political, cultural, economic and philosophical ideas and relationships. They simulate the existing images in old media and displace the fixed meanings of the images. Their works simulate the traditional concept of the body in a socio-political and cultural context with the new technological interface. They present virtuality as a potential actuality that indicates the constant movement of becoming, of transformative potentiality in the world.

These artworks incorporate existing visual images as memories floating in the virtual world of fantasies. They stress that the materiality of the embodied activities of perception, cognition and response continues and is necessary. Furthermore, the virtuality of the objects or images created by technologies offers new virtual space and imagery degrees. Therefore, the issues like virtual subjects and virtual gaze become primary concerns when studying these artworks. It suggests that these are essentially sociological and historical dimensions: there is a need to analyse both the social and economic conditions of the technological and cultural changes produced by digitalisation, the internet, simulation and globalisation of communication and information systems, not to mention their cultural register and deployment.

These artworks incorporate mythical, socio-political and historical data in an ever-changing virtual space created through various technological possibilities. They advocate virtual reality promises the realisation of a radically new era, pregnant with options and futures hitherto unimagined. It transformed notions of space, the body, time, futurity, subjectivity and global connectivity, the digital, cybernetic, cyborgian virtualities that play in daily life and communication, in film and television, in expanded and thoroughly de-categorised art practices. Moreover, they create new textualities and visualities through these simulations.

Although these artworks propound the idea of the mind separated from the performative body of the subjective agency of the artist and viewer, it creates a visuality of the body that has embodied mythical memory, historical memory, and personal interpretations. The posthuman discourse propounds that the intelligence/information appear to have 'lost their bodies'—become dematerialised and disembodied. Machines are imagined as the final liberation from the humans and for the novelty of the posthuman. But these artworks raise questions: Is it possible to dispose of embodied enactment in new media artworks? These new media artworks represent the visuality of the body as an indexical, mythical and historical image. Behind the surface of virtual worlds lie concrete processes of material production, labour, capital, and work by grounded beings in space and time.

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Endnotes

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