

## From the body as limit to the body as a platform: Somaesthetic Pathways between Body Art and Posthumanism

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**Abstract:** *The paper sets out to explore the intricate concept of the incompleteness of the human body, tracing connections between earlier radical experiments of body art artists (from the 1970s to 1990s) and more contemporary explorations in posthumanism. Whereas the former set of experiments interrogated the physical and psychological points of resistance of the body, the latter are currently redefining bodily limits as sites of transformation, extension and empowerment. By way of this comparative study between early and more contemporary formations of body art, we explore the complex interplay between the perception and felt experience of finitude and transcendence for artists and audiences alike.*

**Keywords:** *Anthropopoiesis, Co-dividuality, Fictionality, Posthuman Corporeality, Cyborg Ontology, Somatic Interface.*

### Introduction

The body has always been both the subject and the medium of artistic inquiry. It is the site where existence is affirmed and where mortality is confronted—an ever-present reminder of our impermanence. It has become a battleground where time, decay, and transcendence are negotiated. In contemporary art, the notion of the human body as an incomplete and evolving entity has undergone significant transformation. Whereas it is understood that earlier body artists – i.e. those working between 1970s and 1990s – engaged in extreme performances to test the body’s physical and psychological boundaries, revealing its vulnerabilities and inherent limitations, more contemporary artists, working in response to posthumanist ideas, envision the body as an expandable, mutable entity—one that can integrate biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and media enhancements so as to surpass biological determinism. Evidently, it is through use of enhanced media that contemporary artists are expanding human sensory and cognitive capacities and thus reconceiving the idea of the incompleteness of the human body as a “transitable” concept. In this paper, we compare and contrast the work of different international artists to trace the continuities and ruptures that shape the changing sense of corporeality in the practice of body art.

## 1. The Incompleteness Paradigm and the Post-Human Subject

In the 1990s, a new paradigm of incompleteness gained prominence in aesthetic, philosophical, and social science discourse. It argued that corporeality and subjectivity rest on a biological and symbolic plasticity, continuously shaped through interactions with nature, technology, culture, and communication. It was during this period that post-humanist and trans-humanist hypotheses began to emerge in scientific debate based on ideas of *fictionality* — i.e. the capacity to give apparently stable and defined forms to human plasticity. From this perspective, the human subject became a biopolitical configuration of symbolic formations shaped by somaesthetic and linguistic practices. The idea that humanity is a *dispositive* (Agamben, 2006), characterized by an *opening* (Agamben, 2002), which constantly places it in relation to itself and to alterity (natural, technological, and cultural-communicative) is made possible by complex *anthropogenetic* (Gehlen, 2010) and *anthropopoietic* (Remotti, 2013; Capello Mastroianni, 2024) processes. Fictionality thus becomes a key element within a culturalist paradigm that is expressed in the plural, always open, and indefinite construction of human beings, their social forms, and their representations (Borutti 2005; Remotti 1999, 2005; Mastroianni, 2024).

Modeling, making, unmaking, and constructing thus become the dynamics of the nature-culture dialectic. In its anthropopoietic dimension, this dialectic always leads to the emergence of new forms capable of embracing and transcending biological and symbolic data, incorporating technology, and producing new cultural forms situated within both singularities and collectivities. The formal shaping of the human—through this process of objectification and subjectivation that conforms to aesthetic characteristics and the paradigms of humanity circulating in a given social context—presents an essentially aesthetic, symbolic and linguistic dimension within a *nature-culture-technology dialectic* (Mastroianni, 2024).

### From the Individual to the “Condividuo”: A Relational Anthropology

In the years that followed this post-humanist turn, parallel moves in artistic and anthropological theory took hold. Nicolas Bourriaud (2010, p. 14), for example, proposed the emergence of “relational art”: “an art that practices the sphere of human interactions and its social context as its horizon.” Bourriaud’s concern for a new “transindividual” Subject in artistic practice mirrored the preoccupations of Marilyn Strathern and others in developing an *anthropology of the person* (Remotti 2009, Capello 2016). Synthesizing ideas of personhood found in Melanesian cultures, Strathern (1988) argued that a different conception of the subject circulates in that region, one that does not view the subject as an individual but as a bundle or node of constitutive social relations — a “dividual” being that incorporates the social rather than opposing it (Strathern, 1988). It is from the convergence of these two figures of relational thought that Francesco Remotti (2019) developed his notion of the *condividuo* (Co-dividual or shared-dividual). This term refers both to the transindividual space between and within Subjects. In this sense, anthropology—the study of relationships—positions itself as the knowledge of the *condividuo* (Capello, Mastroianni, 2024).

### The Body in Contemporary Art: From Boundary to Platform

Seeing the person not as a single, autonomous entity, but as a composite of relational influences or *condividuo* is, we argue, the difference that marks a shift in the practice of Body Art (at some point in the 1990s) from boundary to platform. Whereas Body Art artists between the 1970s and

1990s understood “the body” as a raw, finite and individuating organism or *boundary*, a shift in artistic practice began to shape a more contemporary sense of “the body” as an open, mutable *platform*. No longer a bounded vessel, “the body” in contemporary art characterizes a dynamic and hybrid interface between personal experience and world; the site, one might say, of a new kind of personhood. To demonstrate this shift, in the following four sections, we use a unifying theme to contrast and compare the work of “earlier” with more “contemporary” body artists. In moving between these different examples, we argue that we begin to perceive a shift away from “the body” as a marker of endurance and vulnerability to one that regards it as a condition of possibility, open to interrogating its incompleteness through exploring new biological, social, political relations.

## 2. The Body as a Challenge to Mortality

Historically, mythological figures such as Gilgamesh exemplify the ancient human struggle against mortality. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the eponymous king embarks on a desperate quest for eternal life following the death of his companion Enkidu. His journey leads him to Utnapishtim, the Sumerian Noah, the only human granted immortality by the gods, only to learn that death is an inescapable facet of the human condition.

Similarly, Sibilla Cumana, who, according to Roman mythology, was bestowed immortality but not eternal youth, presents another paradigm of corporeal decline. Her fate—gradual disintegration until she is reduced to mere voice—symbolizes the paradox of immortality without preservation. This concept resonates well with transhumanist and posthumanist speculations on longevity, such as Ray Kurzweil’s advocacy for cryonics and artificial intelligence, as a means to preserve consciousness beyond biological decay.

### **Abramović, Burden, De Dominicis: Endurance, Violence, and the Quest for Immortality**

The tension towards the limits of the body, which sinks into the mythological cradle of human destiny, is echoed in the work of artists like Marina Abramović, Chris Burden and the Italian artist Gino De Dominicis, who stand at opposite poles of this exploration, yet their inquiries converge on the same essential question: Can art defy mortality?

Abramović, for example, shaped by the tensions of socialist Yugoslavia and later by the trauma of the Yugoslav wars, confronts mortality through performances that echo the volatility of life in conflict zones. In one of her seminal performances, *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramović offered her body as an open canvas to the audience, placing 72 objects at their disposal, from a rose to a loaded gun. As the hours passed, the performance escalated from tentative engagement to acts of increasing violence—her body transformed into both a receptacle for aggression and a symbol of resistance. *Rhythm 0* (1974) becomes a war-like theatre where the body is surrendered to external forces, suspended between survival and annihilation.



Marina Abramović, Rhythm 0 (1974), <https://art21.org/gallery/marina-abramovic-artwork-survey-1970s/#2>



Chris Burden, Shoot, 1971, <https://gagosian.com/artists/chris-burden/>

Likewise, Chris Burden challenged the limits of bodily endurance and the intersection of violence and spectatorship. Working in the United States during the Vietnam War era, he staged his body in the crosshairs of America's gun culture. His best-known work, *Shoot* (1971), involved asking a friend to shoot him in the left arm from a distance of about sixteen feet (5 m) with a 22 rifle. The act of being shot with a 22 rifle encapsulates both the randomness and the normalization of violence in a society where weapons are easily accessible and underscored the precariousness of human existence, in the face of military and systemic power, and in an American society where guns are in the free market.

De Dominicis approaches death from a philosophical and spiritual perspective rooted in the classical Greek tradition. His works reject the inevitability of death, proposing immortality as an attainable reality—aligning himself with mythological quests for eternal life. His *Lettera sull'Immortalità* (1970) challenges the linearity of time and proposes physical immortality as an attainable reality rather than a mythological fantasy. His *Calamita Cosmica* (1989), a colossal skeletal figure with an enigmatic nose, exists as a paradox—both an emblem of death and a refusal of it. In invoking Sumerian mythology, particularly the figure of Gilgamesh, De Dominicis aligns his vision with ancient quests for eternal life, suggesting that the dissolution of the body is not an inevitability, but rather a failure of imagination, opening at the process of permeability between life and death as an osmotic process of becoming.

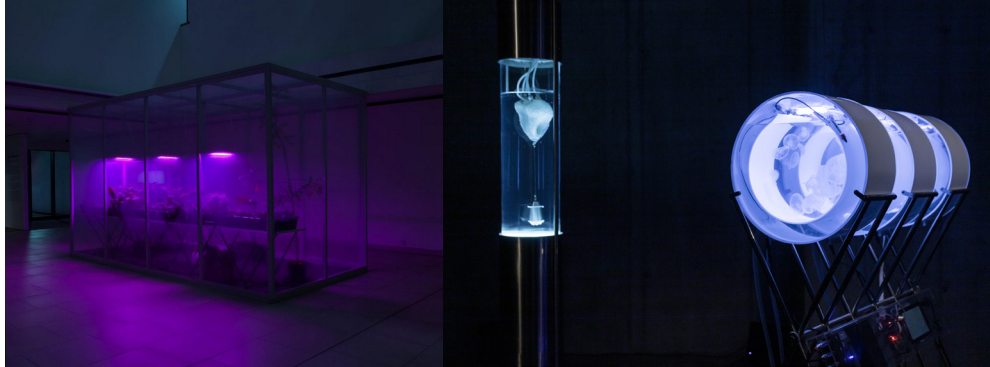
Taken together, Abramović, Burden, and De Dominicis illustrate distinct but intersecting approaches to the confrontation with death: one forged in the crucible of political conflict, another shaped by the violent contradictions of American society, and a third grounded in mythological and philosophical defiance. Abramović's and Burden's bodies, standing at the threshold of destruction, embodied the inevitability of mortality—an unfinished, threatened existence, perpetually at risk. Through endurance and exposure, they stage the body as a site of vulnerability, often put their life in danger, testing the boundaries of what was acceptable as art and the role of the audience as observer and participant, giving the audience the opportunity to push their bodies to the limits of danger. Their pieces, blurring the line between performance and real-life harm, question the ethical dilemmas of participation in acts of violence and the complicity of the viewer in acts of destruction. If they reveal mortality as an inescapable force, implicit in life and violence of human nature, De Dominicis, in contrast, seeks to deny the constraints of time altogether, constructing an artistic mythology in which the body, untouched and immutable, resists decay. De Dominicis stages immortality as an act of defiance, not exposing the body's frailty but transcending it entirely. From a different perspective, they experience first-hand the violence inscribed in the socio-political susceptibility of reality.

### **Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič: Reconfiguring Life with Advanced Technology**

In more contemporary art formations, mortality becomes an issue to be techno-scientifically reconfigured rather than an endpoint. Artists such as Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Robertina Šebjanič, for example, extend their imagination through the lens of biotechnology. In their work, the body is no longer a fixed entity but a malleable, data-infused form, susceptible to genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and technological augmentation.

Dewey-Hagborg's *Spirit Molecule I and II* (2019) examines the persistence of identity beyond death, using DNA as a posthuman archive. In collaboration with the artist Phillip Andrew Lewis, she proposes an intimate, radical act of commemoration: the transformation of a loved one's genetic material into a psychoactive plant, one that could be ingested, allowing for a continued connection beyond the physical demise of the body. In contrast to Abramović's and Burden's

exploration of bodily finitude, Dewey-Hagborg speculates on its extension—on the possibility that mourning might not require letting go, but rather, a reconfiguration of bodily presence in an other post-human species.



On the left: Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Phillip Andrew Lewis, *Spirit Molecules I*, 2018, (<https://deweyhagborg.com/projects/spirit-molecule>);

On the right: Robertina Šebjanič, *Aurelia 1+Hz. Proto viva generator* (2019). NewArtFoundation. Photo Miha Godec

Echoing this, Robertina Šebjanič positions the body within a broader posthumanist dialogue, where life is no longer exclusively bound to human temporality but can be reimagined through interspecies connections and biological reinvention. In *Aurelia 1Hz – Proto Viva Generator* (2014), a sound performance and installation, Šebjanič explores the biological and symbolic resonance of *Aurelia Aurita*, a jellyfish species with remarkable regenerative abilities, often considered biologically immortal. The work immerses the viewer in an audiovisual ecosystem where the rhythms of these primordial creatures, translated into low-frequency sounds, merge with human perception, evoking a non-human temporality beyond the constraints of human lifespan, and remind us that human survival is deeply dependent on marine ecosystems, such as corals and plankton, which sustain life on Earth by producing oxygen. By engaging with scientific research on *Aurelia Aurita*'s regenerative properties and their implications for medicine, *Aurelia 1Hz* challenges anthropocentric notions of decay and mortality, suggesting that if the body is not inherently doomed to decay, what does that mean for our concept of existence? Do we have to experience death to have an idea of finitude? The artist suggests that existence and finitude can be reimagined through biological reinvention and interspecies kinship, behaving *the dividual self*.

Placed in dialogue with literary and mythological figures such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—the archetype of the scientist obsessed with defeating death—these works illuminate the ethical dilemmas of challenging biological determinism. While Frankenstein's creation is condemned to suffering, Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič envision new forms of persistence, where the body does not escape death but transforms through other species and systems. If De Dominicis imagined an immortal body, untouched by decay, Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič envision a body that persists through transformation—shifting, expanding, and reshaping itself to meet the demands of a changing world.

From this perspective, Dewey-Hagborg's exploration of genetic endurance and Šebjanič's reconfiguration of marine life can be read both as participating in and resisting biopolitical regimes of control. Dewey-Hagborg's transformation of DNA into plants and Šebjanič's marine collaborations exemplify a profound reconfiguration of kinship. As Janet Carsten (2004) argues, kinship is not restricted to genealogical lineage but can be constituted through shared substances, practices, and environments. In these artistic explorations, kinship extends across species boundaries and into technological domains, suggesting that DNA, data, and marine organisms may all participate in a broader network of relationality.

This expanded understanding of relatedness aligns with what Vincent Mosco (2004) describes as the "digital sublime," the aura of transcendence often surrounding digital and biotechnological practices. Yet, rather than reinforcing a narrative of inevitable progress, both Dewey-Hagborg and Šebjanič interrogate this aura, exposing the promises and risks embedded in technological mediation. Their works insist that technological interventions in life are never neutral but politically situated, bound to regimes of surveillance, commodification, and control. In this regard, their practices resonate with Donna Haraway's seminal contributions. Haraway (1985) dismantles the humanist notion of the bounded, self-sufficient individual, proposing instead the cyborg as a hybrid figure shaped by the entanglements of biology, technology, and culture. The cyborg, for Haraway, resists both essentialist humanism and dystopian technophobia, offering instead a politics of affinity grounded in interconnection and coalition.

Haraway's later work, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™* (2018), further elaborates this critique by introducing figures such as "FemaleMan," which interrupts the fantasy of a universal, masculine subject, and "OncoMouse™," a genetically engineered, patented animal that epitomizes the commodification of life. These tropes reveal both the risks and the resistances inscribed in biotechnological capitalism, while simultaneously opening imaginative pathways for rethinking kinship, identity, and embodiment beyond anthropocentric and market-driven logics.

### **3. The Human Body as a Trans-Species Being**

Donna Haraway's (2016) reflections on pigeons are emblematic: creatures both natural and technological, urban companions and military messengers, pigeons embody the blurred status of beings that are at once animal and cyborg, mediators of human-nature-technology entanglements. From this perspective, the human body itself must be rethought as a porous and transitional entity: not a closed container of identity, but a living ecosystem where stories, memories, and mutations intersect. The human body becomes a bridge and an interface, open to transformations that unsettle traditional notions of individuality and species belonging.

In the 1970s, artists such as the Cuban-born Ana Mendieta and the German artist Joseph Beuys explored this metamorphic potential by placing the body in direct dialogue with natural elements. Mendieta's earth-body works grounded the female form within soil, blood, and ritual, while Beuys incorporated animals and organic matter into his performances, staging acts of healing and symbolic transformation. In both cases, the human remained distinguishable from the non-human, yet the threshold between them was probed and destabilized.

Since the 2000s, by contrast, artists including Matthew Barney, Pierre Huyghe, and Moon Ribas have intensified this crossing of boundaries. Barney's mythological hybrids, Huyghe's living ecosystems, and Ribas's cyber implants present bodies that no longer simply converse with the natural world but actively absorb, hybridize, and extend it. This is no longer a dialogue but a contamination, a fusion where distinctions between human and non-human dissolve entirely.

In fact, Rosi Braidotti's notion of the nomadic subject is crucial for understanding this shift. In *The Posthuman* (2013), she dismantles the ideal of the bounded individual, proposing instead an identity in motion—fluid, relational, trans-species. In her chapter *Life Beyond Species*, she cites George Eliot: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (p. 63). For Braidotti, beneath the surface of urban civilization lies the “roar” of cosmic vitality, a Spinozist indicator of matter's energy, which inscribes itself within bodies and societies alike. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, this material vitalism conceives of matter as both unified and complex, propelled by a desire for self-expression and ontological freedom.

The key question, then, is what forms of subjectivity and subjectivation emerge from this post-anthropocentric framework? Braidotti articulates a zoe-centered egalitarianism, which rejects the binary distinction between *bios* (life reserved to humans) and *zoe* (life more broadly, non-human and inhuman). Posthuman subjectivity is redefined as part of a continuum of vital forces, desacralizing “human life” as unique and repositioning it within broader ecologies.

Yet this post-anthropocentrism is not without contradictions. As Braidotti notes, in a global neoliberal economy, no animal—or human—is exempt from commodification: all forms of animal life are inscribed within circuits of exchange, exploited with equal intensity across scientific experimentation, biotechnological agriculture, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries. Here, the body (human and non-human alike) is simultaneously the site of vitality and the object of instrumentalization. Melinda Cooper (2008), Australian sociologist and political theorist, highlights this paradox by examining how, in biocapitalism, life itself is put to work at the microbiological and cellular level. The distinction between natural reproduction and technological invention becomes blurred, as biological processes are directly integrated into neoliberal logics of accumulation. New biological theories of growth, complexity, and evolution are thus entangled with economic discourses of scalability, innovation, and risk.

Jean-François Lyotard, in *L'Inhumain*, similarly stresses that resistance to the techno-capitalist reduction of subjectivity lies precisely in the *inhuman* dimensions of the self: its non-unitary, non-rational, indeterminate nature. For Lyotard, it is the instability of boundaries—between genders, races, and species—that opens possibilities for resisting techno-governmental control and imagining alternative futures for embodiment. It is in openness to inhumanity—to difference, to the uncodifiable event—that the possibility of a truly plural, heterogeneous, and open-to-becoming posthuman body unfolds. It is precisely this internal inhuman—the site of the sublime, the unpredictable, the non-codifiable—that resists total assimilation into biopolitical regimes. Art, in Lyotard's view, becomes essential: it renders perceptible the incommensurable, allowing us to experience the differend between languages and the eruption of what cannot be fully expressed. Taken together, Haraway, Braidotti, Cooper, and Lyotard map the contours of a posthuman, trans-species ontology: one in which the body is no longer a fixed biological container but a relational process, traversed by cosmic energies, political economies, and interspecies entanglements.

The artistic practices—from Beuys and Mendieta to Huyghe, Ribas, and beyond—materialize these theoretical trajectories, making visible the body's ongoing transformation into a trans-species being. In constructing this artistic path, the research intentionally follows a transversal gaze—geographically, culturally, and conceptually—bringing together artists from diverse latitudes and sociopolitical contexts to challenge the speciesist divide.



## Mendieta and Beuys: The Body as a Dialogue with Nature



On the left: Ana Mendieta, *Documentation of Tree of Life*, 1976 (Old Man's Creek, Sharon Center, Iowa), 35mm color slide ([https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Ana-Mendieta-Documentation-of-Tree-of-Life-1976-Old-Mans-Creek-Sharon-Center-Iowa\\_fig1\\_348306764](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Ana-Mendieta-Documentation-of-Tree-of-Life-1976-Old-Mans-Creek-Sharon-Center-Iowa_fig1_348306764)) / On the right: Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974. Photo credit Caroline Tisdall. Copyright DACS (2005). ([https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Joseph-Beuys-I-Like-America-and-America-Likes-Me-1974-Photocredit-Caroline-Tisdall\\_fig1\\_263449016](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Joseph-Beuys-I-Like-America-and-America-Likes-Me-1974-Photocredit-Caroline-Tisdall_fig1_263449016))

In Ana Mendieta's research, transformation is a return, a dissolution into the natural cycle: the body is an echo of the earth, a memory of the primordial forces that pass through it. Her art calls forth the non-human that constitutes us, the animal and vegetal realms that inhabit us, a continuity that modern thought has severed. In her *Siluetas*, the body is not a separate entity but an imprint left in mud, sand, and stone—a shadow returning to the landscape as if it had never left. In *Tree of Life* (1976), Mendieta covers her body with mud, becoming tree, root, and bark, embodying the myth of an original unity between human and vegetal life. In *Blood Feathers* (1974), the body is transfigured through blood and feathers, evoking the animal, the sacred, and the wild dwelling within the human.

If Mendieta merged with the earth, Joseph Beuys sought an encounter with the animal—its gaze, its enigmatic and intuitive presence. In *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), Beuys spends three days in a cage with a coyote, a totemic animal symbolizing wisdom and rebellion. Their encounter becomes a ritual, a slow dance in which the human body seeks a form of communication that bypasses language, relying instead on gesture, energy, and presence. Beuys does not merely observe the animal; he allows himself to be observed, studied, accepted, or rejected. The body becomes a space for dialogue that transcends species barriers—not a fusion, but a confrontation, an attempt to recognize oneself in the other. The coyote is not a symbol but an interlocutor; Beuys' art is not representation but a direct experience of transformation.

## Huyghe, Ribas: Body, Myth and Species Boundaries

The French artist Pierre Huyghe takes the discourse even further, dissolving the human body

into the landscape after a nuclear disaster, and intertwining it with other life forms. In his installations, humans, animals, plants, and machines coexist as a single organism, an ecosystem without a center. *Human Mask* (2014) is a haunting meditation on the dissolution of human identity, the artificiality of performance, and the fragile line between species. It opens with a pan of a deserted streetscape near Fukushima, Japan, which was devastated by natural and human-made disasters in 2011.



Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (Human Mask)*, 2014. Film, color, stereo sound, 2 min. 66 sec. Running time: 19 min. © Adagp Paris. Courtesy the artist: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Hauser & Wirth, London; Esther Schipper, Berlin; and Anna Lena Films, Paris. <https://lesoeuvres.pinaultcollection.com/en/artwork/untitled-human-mask>

The film, shot in an abandoned restaurant in Japan, features a monkey wearing a traditional Noh mask and a wig, wandering through the deserted space. The monkey moves through the post-apocalyptic setting as if trapped in an endless theatrical loop, performing for no one, embodying a hollow humanity that persists even in emptiness. The monkey, trained to serve customers, repeats automated, purposeless gestures, caught in a cycle of movement that no longer has meaning in the absence of human presence. The mask, a human artifact, paradoxically strips the figure of its humanity rather than granting it. Instead of revealing, it conceals—what lies beneath is not quite human, nor entirely animal. The animal does not merely mimic the human—it becomes an uncanny, liminal being, an entity suspended between species, between presence and absence, between ritual and instinct. What we perceive as ‘human’ may be nothing more than a series of programmed behaviors—a performance, just like the one the monkey enacts.

Through this piece, Huyghe questions our anthropocentric assumptions: if a monkey, masked and trained, can carry out the gestures of a human, where does the distinction between human and non-human truly lie? *Human Mask* dissolves these categories, offering a vision of a post-human world where identity is no longer stable, where the boundaries between species, nature, and culture dissolve into a silent, uncanny choreography. *Human Mask* does not only portray a desolate post-disaster landscape; it stages the collapse of human centrality within the wider ecology of life. In a world devastated by nuclear catastrophe, survival and continuity are not guaranteed by humans but by other species—i.e. organisms like fungi that thrive in irradiated environments, turning toxicity into conditions of possibility. This resilience reveals that life, as Braidotti argues, is always multiple, transversal, and in becoming: a zoe-centered vitality that exceeds human control and imagination. The posthuman condition thus compels us to rethink destruction not as an endpoint but as a threshold for other modes of existence. Amid

ecological ruin, new alliances and unexpected kinships emerge, reminding us that the future of life cannot be conceived through human exceptionalism, but through a recognition of the complex multiplicity of becoming-species together.

Moon Ribas, Take for example, the work of the Catalan artist Moon Ribas who sets out to radicalize the concept of trans-species existence, transcending the boundary between organic and technological. Both artist and cyborg, Ribas implanted sensors in her body, allowing her to perceive seismic movements of the Earth in real time. In *Waiting for Earthquakes she dances* earthquakes and moonquakes felt within her body, becoming a sensitive extension of the planet, an entity attuned to phenomena beyond human perception. In a similar vein, Manel De Aguas, a self-described “cyborg artist,” expands trans-species identity by modifying his sensory perception. He developed and implanted weather-sensing cybernetic fins into his head, enabling him to perceive atmospheric changes through bone conduction. By integrating artificial organs that provide non-human sensory experiences, De Aguas embodies the transhumanist ideal of evolving beyond biological constraints, blurring the lines between species and technology.



Moon Ribas, Seismic garment. Pictures by Carlos Montilla.



Moon Ribas, *Waiting For Earthquakes* @ Hyphen Hub

Together, Ribas and De Aguas co-founded the Transpecies Society, an organization advocating for the recognition of new identities beyond traditional human classifications, promoting the development of new sensory perceptions and body modifications as a means of expanding human experience. The body is no longer solely human, nor solely animal—it is an extension of the world, a radar, a receptor of signals from other dimensions of existence.

Trans-species existence is not just an artistic theme but a fundamental condition of being: everybody has always been in mutation, in relation, in resonance with what is beyond itself. The future of the human body is not in a fixed definition but in continuous rewriting—a body that does not close itself off, but opens, that does not defend itself, but allows itself to be traversed, that does not merely exist, but becomes.

#### 4. The Body as a Living Engraved Text

Throughout history, various cultural and artistic practices have conceived the body as a site of inscription, transformation, and revelation. In mythology, figures such as Attis and Dionysus embody the ritualistic act of self-mutilation as a means of spiritual transcendence. Attis, a priest devoted to the goddess Cybele, castrates himself in an ecstatic act of devotion, symbolizing the ultimate transformation of body and identity. Similarly, the Menads, followers of Dionysus, engage in violent, frenzied acts of self-inflicted wounds during Bacchic rituals, dissolving the boundary between pain and ecstasy, body and divinity.

Through blood, wounded flesh, and inflicted pain, body art artists have transformed the body into a symbolic battlefield, a living language that screams, whispers, opens and closes like

a wound that can never fully heal. In this perspective, self-injury is not mere destruction but revelation: an extreme gesture through which the body becomes the voice of visceral emotion, social denunciation, and an inquiry into the very meaning of identity and human limitation.

From Gina Pane's martyrdom to Ana Mendieta's blood-stained memory, from Franko B's ritualistic sacrifice to Stelarc's technological hybridization and Donnarumma's sonic experimentation, the body emerges as a living engraved text through which the code of organic life can be reinscribed; a surface where the possibility of rewriting one's destiny is at stake. To self-injure in body art is an act of bodily writing, a way to make visible what often remains buried: structural violence, individual pain, the fragility of the collective body, its ability to resist. To self-injure in cyborg art is an act of radical becoming—a way to carve new pathways beyond the limits of gender, species, and biology itself.

### **Pane, Mendieta, Franko B: The Skin as a Vessel of Suffering and Collective Human Fragility**



Gina Pane, *Azione Sentimentale*, 1973 (Details). Available via license: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International. [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-1-Gina-Pane-Azione-Sentimentale-1973-Detalle-Recuperada-de-http\\_fig1\\_314027727](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-1-Gina-Pane-Azione-Sentimentale-1973-Detalle-Recuperada-de-http_fig1_314027727).

The Italian artist Gina Pane is one of the most emblematic figures of body art, and her performance *Azione Sentimentale* (1973) represents one of the most significant examples of self-injury in the context of body art. In this performance, Pane dressed in white, carrying a bouquet of red roses. The initial gesture of removing the thorns from the roses and thrusting them into her arm, followed by the act of replacing the roses with some white ones and cutting the palm of her hand with a blade, becomes an act of self-awareness through physical pain. Pane's performance can be read as a reworking of the Catholic tradition of martyrdom, in which the body becomes the means to achieve a deeper understanding of one's own human existence and frailty. Each cut is an act of awareness, a mark imprinted on both flesh and the gaze of the observer. The blood

gushing from her body is not only a sign of physical suffering, but also a symbol of a spiritual and cultural quest.

Where Pane employs incisions, the Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta leaves imprints. *Body Tracks* (1974-1976) is a silent scream: bloodied hands slide down walls, leaving traces that evoke absent presences, disappeared bodies, histories of violence and memory. Mendieta stood against a wall in a sacrificial manner with her arms extended upwards and outwards in a “V”. She then slowly slides down the surface and kneels, leaving behind the red trails of her blood-soaked hands as she stands up to look at the camera and step out of the frame. Drawing from the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, Mendieta uses animal blood and tempera paint to create imprints of her hands on white paper. Mendieta uses blood as a bridge between the individual and the collective, between the private dimension of suffering and the historical context in which it is inscribed. Her bloodied silhouettes, left on the ground, evoke femicide, the brutality of exile, the condition of those torn from their homeland. Yet, in this cruel gesture, there is also a form of belonging: the wounded body is not only a victim but also a root entwined with nature, reclaiming space, dialoguing with the ancestral memory of flesh and blood. If Pane’s cuts are intimate revelations, Mendieta’s gestures speak of absent bodies and ancestral memory. Blood becomes both wound and root, connecting the individual to the political, the body to nature, private suffering to collective belonging.



Ana Mendieta, *Body Tracks*, 1974-76. <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collections/artwork/untitled-blood-sign-2body-tracks>

The Italian artist Franko B lets the blood flow, offers it, exposes it in all its raw materiality. In *I Miss You* (1999-2005), his naked body walks down on a catwalk stage, blood trickling down his skin, dripping onto the pristine surface, creating a map of suffering and desire. Franko B transforms pain into a language of emotion: the body is not only a battlefield but an open diary where blood becomes a tragic ink, a testimony of solitude, of love dissolving into emptiness. His performance is neither an act of heroism nor self-pity but a radical exposure of human vulnerability. The audience watches, bears witness, questions: how much suffering can we endure seeing? To what extent can the body become an archive of emotions without being annihilated?

Unlike Pane’s ascetic gestures or Mendieta’s historical inscriptions, Franko B’s performance is a radical exposure of emotional fragility, a diary written in blood where the viewer is compelled to question their own capacity for empathy and endurance.



Franko B, *I MISS YOU*, performed in Malmo Sweden in November 2000. Ph. Manuel Vason Courtesy the artist

### **Stelarc and Donnarumma: The Skin as Biomechanical Interface for Revelation**

The Cyprus-born Australian performance artist, Stelarc, takes the discourse on pain even further, turning it into a meditation on the mechanics of the body. Hanging in the void, held only by the tension of its own skin, the body becomes a pure instrument. There is no visible blood, no open wound—only the weight of the body swaying, the flesh stretched to its limits.

In his *Suspensions* (2012) performances, Stelarc suspends his body from hooks pierced into his skin, pushing the boundaries between pain, control, vulnerability, and transformation. The flesh becomes a support structure to be tested, expanded, and transformed, a platform for biomechanical experimentation. In this process, pain dissolves into the deliberate reconfiguration of the body as a modifiable entity—a structure to be hacked, altered, and pushed beyond the constraints of biology. Stelarc's claim that "the body is obsolete" aligns with Braidotti's vision of a subject that is always "becoming" embracing an affirmative posthumanism, one that moves beyond humanist nostalgia for bodily integrity and instead embraces relationality, fluidity,

and multiplicity. Obsolescence of the human body is not a deficiency but a condition of transformation.



Above: Stelarc. City Suspension, Above the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen 1985. Ph. Morten Schandorff.

Below: Stelarc. Moving / Modifying: Suspension for Obsolete Body. Espace DBD, Los Angeles 1982. Ph. Daniel J. Martinez



Unlike the flowing wounds of Pane, Mendieta, or Franko B, Stelarc's flesh is bloodless yet strained, turned into a biomechanical platform. Pain dissolves into experimentation: the body becomes obsolete, no longer defined by its organic limits but reconfigured as an interface for technology and posthuman becoming.

Together, these artists articulate a spectrum: from Pane's sacrificial awareness to Mendieta's political memory, from Franko B's emotional testimony to Stelarc's technological transcendence. Their works reveal how the wounded body can be a martyr, archive, diary, or instrument—always incomplete, always open to transformation.

Donnarumma, on the other hand, pushes the body into uncharted territory: At the heart of *Amygdala* is an artificially intelligent (AI) robot, shaped like a human-like limb and driven by biomimetic neural networks. These networks are not pre-programmed; instead, they function as iterative mathematical equations computed in real time, mimicking the sensorimotor system of animals. With surgical precision, the robot wields a knife to manipulate and sculpt a large piece of skin. Its work is repetitive, meticulous, and potentially infinite—its sole purpose is to learn and enact a ritual of purification known as “skin-cutting.”



Marco Donnarumma, *Amygdala*. Ph. Paweł Józwiak.

Donnarumma offers the following insight into the conceptual underpinning of the artwork. As he explains (Donnarumma, 2019) the practice of skin-cutting draws from indigenous traditions across Papua New Guinea, Africa, and East Asia, while Christian and Muslim religions have historically enacted similar bloodletting rituals, albeit in different forms and conceptualizations. Through the experience of pain and bodily wounds, purification is achieved. For the artist, seemingly distant, purification rituals and AI technology share a crucial role in the politics of the human body. Throughout history, purification rituals have been one of the

oldest means of social categorization, marking inclusion and exclusion within a community. In a similarly perverse and dangerous way, the artist claims, today's participation in AI-driven algorithmic analysis—through private data and online behavior—now determines and regulates access to medical care, social welfare, and criminal justice systems. The body, once cut open in search of transcendence, is now sorted and dissected by data streams that govern its possibilities and exclusions. In *Amygdala*, this convergence is neither abstract nor metaphorical—it is materialised in the machine's relentless gesture. The knife does not simply lacerate skin; it inscribes the violence of categorisation, exposing the porous boundaries between ritual, technology, and biopolitics.

Donnarumma compels us to perceive suffering in an unprecedented way, to question what it truly means to feel pain. The body is no longer merely a surface to be lacerated; it becomes an interface of biodata, an organism whose privacy, spirit and intimacy have been violated, translating its wounds into a code that expands the perception of trauma beyond the visual dimension.

In 2022, David Cronenberg radicalized this concept in his film *Crimes of the Future* by envisioning surgery as the new form of eroticism and artistic expression. In a future where humans develop new organs and mutations, performance artists use surgical procedures as spectacles, reconfiguring their bodies as mutable landscapes for creation and fruition rather than destruction. In the post-organic body, media are not just more extensions of the human body (as Marshall McLuhan argued), they are the human body themselves. This transformation of the body into a medium had been already exemplified by the protagonist of *Videodrome* (1983), Max Renn, whose exposure to media waves mutates his body into a living extension of television technology. His torso develops a gaping wound that functions as both a VCR slot and a grotesque bodily aperture, illustrating how media not only influences but literally invades and reshapes corporeality.

## 5. The Body as Measure: Servant Arbitrator of Time and Information

The body is measure and boundary, prison and instrument, register and memory. The body bends under the weight of time but, at the same time, it becomes its tangible proof, the living testimony of its duration, its erosion, its reiteration in inexorable cycles. In the art of performance, the body becomes the metronome of existence, beating out the rhythms of waiting, of action, of resistance. Some artists make it the site of an extreme challenge to temporality, others conceive it as a malleable terrain, a fluid entity capable of bending time and space into an unprecedented perception of experience.

Since the 1980s, with Tehching Hsieh, and in the last decade, with Korean artists Moon & Jeon, distinct yet ultimately converging trajectories have interrogated the complex entanglement between the body and time. Hsieh imposes on his own body the condition of duration, forcing it to reiterate gestures and postures until it becomes the measure of repetition itself. Moon & Jeon, on the other hand, treat the body as a plastic unit, which does not limit itself to recording time but shapes it, curves it, reconfigures it. Two different ways of inhabiting time, of giving it form, of undergoing and transgressing it.

### Tehching Hsieh: The Body as Captivity and Resistance



Tehching Hsieh, One Year Performance 1980 –1981. Punching the Time Clock. Photograph by Michael Shen © Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy the artist

Tehching Hsieh consigns himself to time like a condemned man who, paradoxically, chooses his own punishment. His *One Year Performances* are extreme experiments in resistance and repetition, acts of blind devotion to the passing of hours, days and years. In *One Year Performance 1980-1981*, Hsieh lives locked in a cell, depriving himself of speech, interaction, and distraction. Repetition here becomes an exercise in survival: each day is the same as the previous one, each hour is diluted in a ruthless monotony. The act of existing is reduced to an exact calculation, an accumulation of minutes that settle on the skin, in the breath, in the posture of the body. Hsieh becomes a living measure of time, his body a silent witness to its advance, to its inexorability.

Hsieh is a slave to his rule, but this very slavery allows him to explore time in its purest essence. Time becomes a wall to touch with his hands, to feel in his bones, to measure through fatigue, boredom, deprivation. Repetition, then, is both an act of obedience and a gesture of revolt: repetition means resisting, it means affirming the body as an entity that does not allow itself to be dissolved in the indistinct flow of time, but challenges it, confronts it, crosses it to the end.

### **Moon & Jeon: The Body as Bending Time**

If for Hsieh, time is a prison to be inhabited to the point of exhaustion, for Moon & Jeon it is a malleable substance, a wave that the body can ride, bend, redefine. *The Ways of Folding Space & Flying* is a multimedia installation by Korean artists Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho, presented at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Inspired by Taoist philosophy and speculative sci-fi, the work explores humanity's desire to transcend physical and metaphysical boundaries. The project draws from two Korean concepts: *chukjibeop*, the hypothetical folding of space to enable instant travel, and *bihaengsul*, the supernatural ability to levitate and move across time and space. These ideas symbolize the Taoist pursuit of liberation from physical constraints, envisioning ultimate freedom. *The Way of Folding Time and Space* is a reflection on the possibility of escaping the linearity of time, of constructing an experience in which past, present and future are no longer rigid sequences, but elastic surfaces to be modelled. In their work, the body is not a passive witness of time, but a fluctuating architecture, a hologram that crosses different dimensions, superimposes itself, dissolves and recomposes. Repetition here is not an act of resistance but a strategy of transformation: to reiterate, repetition is not to suffer time, but to rewrite it, manipulate it, play with its possibilities.



MOON Kyungwon & JEON Joonho, *The Ways of Folding Space & Flying*, 2015, HD Film Installation, 10 min. 30 sec., Dimensions Variable © MOON Kyungwon & JEON Joonho.

Where Hsieh imposes a regime of exhausting repetition on the body, Moon & Jeon liberate it from this rigidity, immersing it in an environment where time-space is a fabric that can be woven in new ways with space in modelling. Their work invites us to think of the body not as a static measure of time, but as a means of experiencing it in new forms, where memory is no longer a linear repository of events, but a fluid stratification of sensations and images.

In the end, the question remains open: is the body really a prisoner of time, or can it somehow transcend it? Is it a fixed measure, a precise unit, or is it a variable capable of escaping the rigidity of duration?

## 6. The Body as Temporal Bio-Bank

The human body, in its biochemical dimension, is neither fixed nor self-contained—it is a porous, ever-changing system, a site of transformation where biochemical processes and thresholds are continuously negotiated. Vito Acconci explored the anti-aesthetics of the bodily fluids, using them as art-making material with their extreme charge as social subject residues, markers of vulnerability and excess. In contrast, contemporary bio and multimedia artists like Marisa Satsia and Heather Dewey-Hagborg reframe the biochemical body as a dynamic platform—an interface between biology, technology, and political structures.

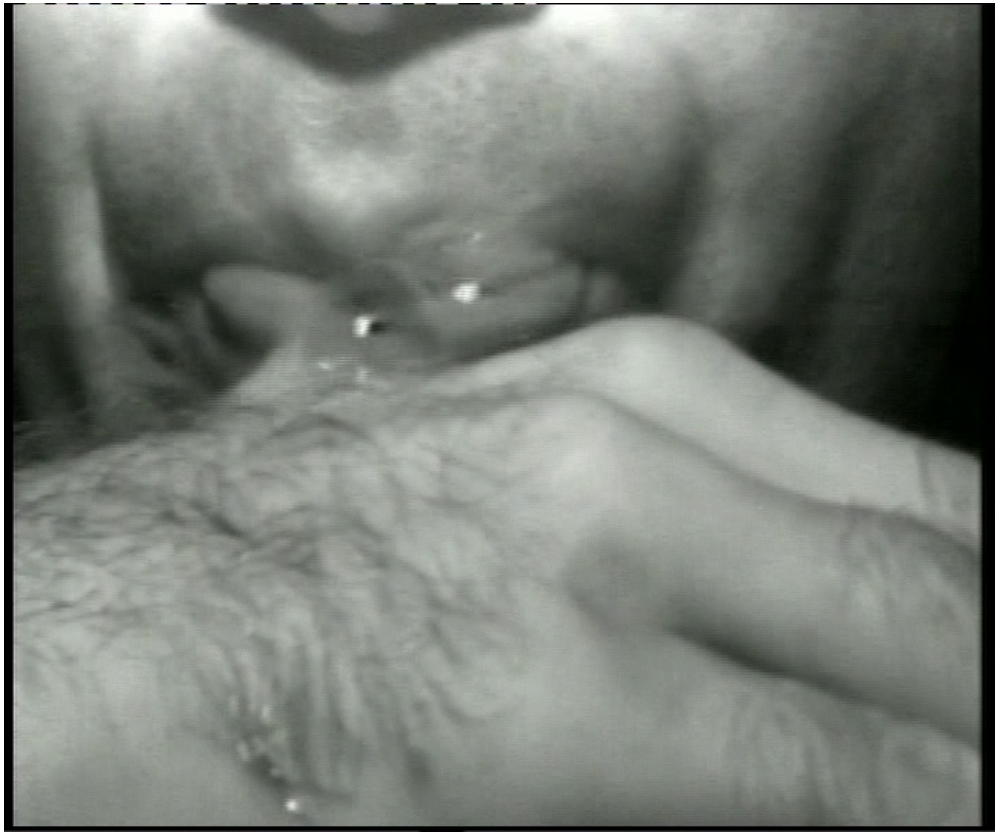
The works of these artists offer a critical reflection on how bodily fluids can be used as biological traces and how the body itself can be seen both as an object of surveillance and as a technological resource, pushing the discourse on self-surveillance and the right to privacy in a post-humanist context. The body is no longer simply a site of rupture and corporeal susceptibility but of expansion; its fluids, data, and processes are not just traces of decay but resources to be repurposed, manipulated, and shielded from biopolitical control.

### **Acconci, Satsia, Dewey-Hagborg: from Bodily Excess to Biopolitical Resource and Counter-surveillant.**

Vito Acconci's *Waterways 4: Saliva Studies* (1972) epitomizes the radical body art of the 1970s, in which the body was dissected in its most elemental functions. *Waterways* comprises four minimalist exercises in which Acconci explores the formal, visual and dynamic properties of saliva in a controlled performance situation. Using extreme close-ups and amplified sound to force the viewer into the space of his body, he experiments with his mouth as a container for saliva, holding it in his mouth as long as possible, trying to catch it in his hands. His exploration of saliva as waste—something expelled, overlooked, yet deeply intimate—reveals the body's unavoidable materiality, emphasizing its unpleasantness through its constant secretion, loss, and renewal.

The Cypriot artist, Marisa Satsia, by contrast, moves from this vision of bodily fluids as abject remains to an understanding of them as potential resources. Her *Open Source Body* (2017) reclaims saliva, urine, sweat, teardrops, intimate fluids as a site of knowledge, embedding it in a discourse of biotechnological empowerment. Here, body secretions are no longer a condition to be exposed as an anti-aesthetic and disgusting human condition, but an opportunity for biohacking and collective exchange. The artist invites us to rethink the human body as a material resource: urine can be rethought as a fertilizing medicine, plant fertilizer, cosmetics or biobricks. The body's bacteria and vaginal fluids can be used for the production of cheese bread and yoghurt. Other body fluids can serve as minerals for electronics and food sources for more than humans. Hair can also be repurposed as bio-textiles and so on. For Satsia, the human body is a biological product that can be shared and manipulated in an eco-friendly logic of tech recycling.

However, the project opens up ethical questions concerning the potential exploitation of the body as a commodity or resource for monitoring and control, which we are going to investigate.



Acconci, Waterways, 4 Saliva Studies, 1971 video, black & white, sound, 22'25", Courtesy Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Torino.



Marisa Satsia, Open Source Body - [Meta]fluidic gems and apparatus series. EMAP Group Exhibition. Told You It's Alive. Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana. 28.11.2023-2.2.2024. Photo by Hana Marn



Marisa Satsia, Open Source Body - [Meta]fluidic gems and apparatus series. EMAP Group Exhibition. Told You It's Alive. Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana. 28.11.2023-2.2.2024. Photo by Marijo Zupanov



Heather Dewey-Hagborg, *Stranger Visions*, 2013-14 <https://deweyhagborg.com/projects/stranger-visions>

Heather Dewey-Hagborg's work, in particular her projects *DNA Spoofing* (2012) and *Stranger Visions* (2012-2013), address the use of body fluids and traces, such as saliva, hair, nails... as biological traces that can be used for surveillance and investigation. In *Stranger Visions*, Dewey-Hagborg collected DNA from discarded objects found in public spaces—chewing gum, hair, and cigarette butts—to generate 3D facial reconstructions of the unknown individuals who had left these traces. The project employs forensic DNA phenotyping, a controversial technology used to infer physical characteristics from genetic material, raising urgent ethical and political concerns about genetic privacy, surveillance, and the commodification of biological identity. By demonstrating how personal genetic data can be extracted and reconstructed without consent, *Stranger Visions* questions the growing role of biometrics and DNA forensics in law enforcement and state control, aligning with critiques of forensic biopolitics and genetic determinism.

As Caronia argues, the moment it is possible to alter the genome of another human being, we all become genetic cyborgs even if no one has altered our DNA. The social and investigative device *Forensic DNA Phenotyping* becomes a central device that creates new conditions in terms of the whole society. Once artifice appears on the horizon of the human species, there are no longer natural human beings. The preconditions for the technological explosion had already been given during the 18th and early 19th centuries with the birth of biopolitics, that is, with the appearance of a set of techniques for governing the population that no longer took the natural data as unchangeable and configured options for intervention on biological behavior, on the biology of populations.” It is for these reasons that in *DNA Spoofing*, the artist proposes counter-surveillance strategies which alter and mask the way genetic information is read, manipulating and distorting biological data as a form of resistance against the abuse of genetic surveillance. Contemporary multimedia artistic practices become a means of resistance, developing new strategies of obfuscation and self-determination against biopower.



## Conclusion

The incompleteness of the body, once seen as a marker of endurance and vulnerability, has been reconfigured in posthuman aesthetics as a condition of possibility. Whether through cyborg augmentation, genetic intervention, or speculative design, contemporary artists reimagine the body as an open system, capable of infinite reconfigurations. In doing so, they challenge not only the limits of the flesh but also the sociopolitical structures and four-dimensional structure of the universe. Artificial human beings, replicated or invaded, are the effect of a knowledge device, starting from Hoffman's automatons and Frankenstein, of a certain set of techno-scientific knowledge that has made possible, real, the transformation of a human body into a more than human being in time and space.

As we move further into the 21st century, the posthuman body emerges not as a fixed entity but as a site of ongoing negotiation—a dynamic interplay between biological materiality, technological mediation, and cultural inscription. It is within this space of becoming that art and theory as well as anthropological thought and practice converge, offering new ways of imagining what it means to be human in an age of unprecedented transformation.

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