

“Human Enhancement Aesthetics”

to provide knowledge about aesthetics of radical human enhancement



Natasha Vita-More, 2009

Of all the new media impacting the arts, the media of human enhancement may be receiving the most socio-political attention but the least artistic enthusiasm. Recently there has been an increase in the number of formal discussions of human enhancement technologies amongst artists, designers and curators. In 2008, “Human Enhancement Technologies: The Role of Art and Design” spearheaded social and ethical implication of enhancement technologies. In 2009, “Human Enhancement & Nanotechnology Conference” and FACT’s “Human Futures” programme breached a gap in science and

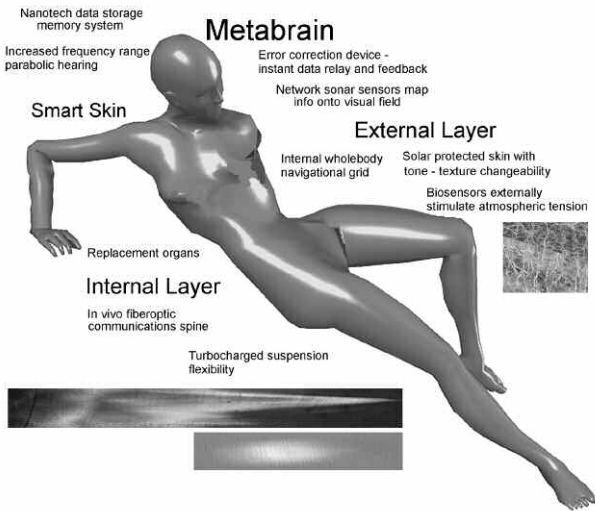
art with discussions of aesthetics norms and ethics. Nonetheless, the elements of aesthetics in engaging human enhancement were of less consequence.

The importance of emerging technologies of enhancement for artmaking awaits a field to challenge the traditional role of aesthetic judgment. Bringing aesthetics into discussions where nano-bio-info-cogno converging technologies are evident gives an artistic voice to the science of human enhancement and urges an aesthetic role in human futures.

Framing human enhancement morphology into categories of emerging and exploratory helps to provide a glimpse of what artists’ media might be. Emerging media range from immersive virtual personas (avatar) to machine cyborg in adjusting physiological attributes. The exploratory media radically change the body’s form, alter its lifespan, and enhance cognitive processes (transhuman/posthuman).

This emerging/exploratory scope of design engineering includes synthetic and natural environments and suggests bio-nano bodily design with enhanced info-cogno/neuro processing power.

The nano-bio-info-cogno/neuro quintet of the future human body, as visionaries forecast, will be split: embodied and/or disembodied, one identity and/or multiple selves, and human



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and/or posthuman. Perceptibly, the genealogical attributes of being human are no longer exclusively linear.

Genealogical knowledge as suggested by Foucault is the key tool in a search for aesthetics of existence. Programming knowledge (artificial general intelligence and nanorobotics) could be the key tool in the search for aesthetics of enhanced existence. What genealogical explanations of the body provide beyond a history of kinship is an examination of how social mechanisms function. What programming explanations of the body provide is an examination of how evolving, adaptive systems could operate in providing a flux of sensory input.

Programming humans taps into the issue of the human not remaining a biological species, which brings the discussion back to ethics. Nonetheless, the central issue of aesthetics and existence confirms the act of stylizing what we might become. The activity of giving style to one's existence turns an autonomous style into an open and enhanced network of styles. Indubitably, the self-hood as mortal, changing and

embodied is giving way to the extended, evolving, and distributed existence.

The avatar as a virtual component of the radically enhanced existence takes aesthetics seriously. Alpha Auer's (a/k/a Elif Ayitar) avatar designs are a prime example. Artworks also need to engage the mental faculties between human body in real time and avatar in virtual space. One of the pending problems of human enhancement concerns what happens when there is more than one of you who share your cognition—a distributed identity of a posthuman?

This very question has been an ongoing focus of discussion on Extropy, an intellectually high-powered transhumanist email list. According to the premise, the continuant self consists of temporal stages. During these temporal stages, to remain psychologically intact, the self would have to maintain a hierarchy of instructions: the central self would disseminate knowledge to the alternative selves, which could co-exist in real-time, semi-virtual, immersive, and full-virtual environs. Later, when the programming develops a method for building connective social systems, possibly a variation on actor network theory, and a fluid self evolves. This system would function best in distributed environments to propagate cohesiveness between selves, rather than applying a top down approach of one mastermind with sub-personalities.

Regardless of whether bodies are bio or digital, sensorial pleasures are transferable. The telematic, immersive, and extended experiences of an enhanced existence lean toward a highly developed range of pleasures.

Umberto Eco asked, "[i]s beauty something ontologically self-subsistent, which gives pleasure when it is

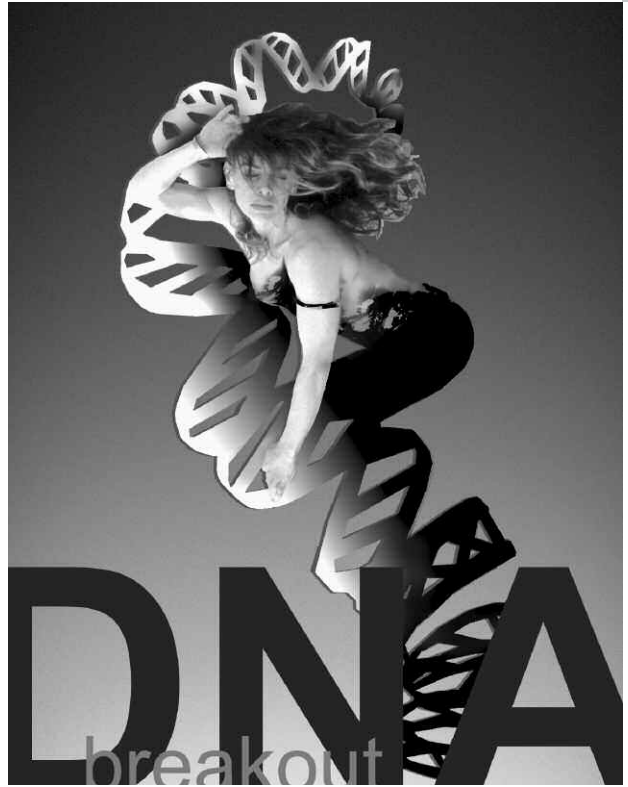
apprehended? Or is it rather the case that a thing appears beautiful only when someone apprehends it in such a way as to experience a certain type of pleasure?"[1] Beauty can be one, the other, or both ways—taking it into state of multiplicity. The idea that historically a person had to be located in one field, one ideology, one body changes to the proactive prospect that it is not an either or scenario, but an array of possibilities.

From artistic insight, experience, and imagination, the development of a new aesthetic discourse gives rise to the possibility of even greater advanced in human enhancement. Taken a step further, to radically alter human life—its foundation, its formation and its duration through NBIC-mediated modifications of the body and mind.

Human enhancement is an open-ended synthesis of electronic, telematic and performative arts, robotics, bio art, wearables, and multi-user forms of gaming and virtuality. Yet, trying to nail it down without including media not yet developed (NBIC+), the aesthetics of human enhancement begins to lose its vision. Artists working in the area of human enhancement will inevitably find their precursors and include or build on them and the aesthetic process will unfold.



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Notes

[1] Eco, H. (1988) *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*. Bredin, H. (trans.) Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 49.

Hekman, S.J. (1996) *Feminist Interpretations of Michael Foucault*. University Park: Pen State Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1989) *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Kaufmann, W. (ed.) New York: Vintage.

**Natasha
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1997**