

POSTHUMANISM AND CONTEMPORARY ART

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The art in MOCA's Winter/Spring exhibition *Stranger*, is art of the posthuman era.

The idea of the posthuman is a big new philosophical and scientific concept, and big new philosophical or scientific concepts often cause paradigm shifts in the way we think about our world, about ourselves, and about our relation to the universe. And that, in turn, changes art. Which changes us, because art reflects and anticipates our struggles to absorb and assimilate new ideas and how they relate to us.

The paradigm shift we are moving through now is being caused by the increasing saturation of our daily existence by emerging technology. This saturation is so complete that we are not even fully conscious of it all. It has become so much a part of us: our ties to smart phones, virtual games, and social media are becoming increasingly umbilical and routine—so much so that these digital artifacts alone are changing the very fabric of our society.



But there is more: many thinkers say emerging technology will change what it means to be human, and that, in fact, it is already doing so. One small example of this is the growing collection of devices that allow us to alter our natural human limits: we have robots that allow us to experience planets by proxy—and in ways, as with the Mars Rover's infrared sensors, that we could not do naturally. Modern science has also recently provided us with artificial retinas and inner ears (cochleae), artificial voices (like the kind that allows the famed physicist Stephen Hawking to talk); and even with pacemakers, automatic defibrillators and insulin pumps that allow us to cheat death itself. In fact, for the first time, technology experts think that we are on the verge of speeding up and controlling our own evolution, even of transforming ourselves into a new species—one that is beyond human, one that is posthuman. Thus the name that some have given to our current era: a posthuman, and post-humanist one. These are two different but related concepts in that both are marked by rapidly accelerating technological change.

Antoine Catala, *Feel Images (Distant)*, 2015, digital photograph on suede fabric, cotton, wood, and batting, 72 x 48 x 5 1/4 inches. Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York and Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

The posthuman is a new species of human that will evolve rapidly and soon from our own technological self-modification. It is a literal view of what humans can become. Posthumanism, or post-humanism, is a philosophical conundrum: upon what will we base our conceptual view of ourselves now that postmodern technology, science and thought has chipped away at the traditional, humanistic basis of our Western self-image? It is this philosophical tension caused by our intellectual and technological changes that most influences art, including the art in this exhibition.



Ian Cheng, *Something Thinking of You* (still), 2015, live simulation with sound, infinite duration. Courtesy of the artist.

Both humanism and its modern antithesis, posthumanism, originated in the western hemisphere. In Renaissance Europe, Christianity was the central concept driving art, but to it was added the force of humanism—a new and popular philosophy that originated in the late 1400's. Humanism caught on because its focus on human potential coincided with the rise of Europeans' sense of their own power, as both scholars and seafarers from its countries began to uncover new territory. Ironically, despite growing skepticism about the science of ancient Greece and Rome, humanism started with the fifteenth-century rediscovery of some mystical texts from the classical era. Scholars like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his teacher, Marsilio Ficino, translated some of these newly rediscovered Greek texts, along with some Hebrew Cabalistic texts, into Latin, making them available to Western Europe for the first time in hundreds of years. These texts claimed to transmit special godlike powers to those who read them properly and who made themselves spiritually pure. Pico, Ficino, and their followers saw in these recovered texts a recipe for humans to recapture the godlike power and knowledge they had supposedly participated in before their ejection from the Garden of Eden. They were convinced humans, as God's favored creatures, were originally meant, in their sinless state, to be specially favored, to be "the measure of all things." And they were convinced that these new "humanistic" ideas, coupled with strong Christian devotion, could reconstitute a state like that of Eden.

The art of the Renaissance reflects humanist thought in its idealized representation of the human form—think of the beauty of the human figures in Michelangelo’s art, in his statues like David (1501-04) or the Pieta (1498-99).

Posthumanism, which evolved from a combination of Postmodernism and a strong dose of added technology, is the antithesis of humanism. This new philosophy is one that sees the narratives we have been telling ourselves over the past 500 years to explain our existence as just that: narratives, simple stories. Our sense of specialness as a species, our centrality to the universe, is undermined by our very own growing, scientific abilities. Because by making digital machines that can act increasingly like us, by discovering that animals have inner lives and languages, including human language (like the famous chimpanzee Washoe, who could speak fluent American Sign Language), and by discovering that there might be life on other planets, we have diminished our own importance as a species. Simultaneously, though, new stories arise from our scientific discoveries, from the convergence of our technology and ourselves, of our past and our future, and they arise through and are reflected by art. These new stories we begin to tell ourselves about our existence are varied, as diverse as our growing technology and scientific changes. But confusing. And ever-shifting. As yet not fully developed, like ourselves in this new era. Maybe this is an uncomfortable transition to a new, more stable existential narrative, but for the time being we are caught betwixt and between, and this is what the art in this exhibition reflects.



Cécile B. Evans, *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen* (still), 2014, color video with sound, 22:30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.