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Anatomías Fluidas y Alteridades Tecnológicas. En torno a las Estéticas Postanatômicas en el Arte Performativo Contemporáneo

Anatomies Fluides i Alteritats Tecnològiques. Entorn de les Estètiques postanatòmiques en l'Art Performatiu Contemporani

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine postanatomical aesthetics in contemporary performance art by shedding light on its contribution to the new materialist debate on human and technology intra-actions. To this end, we highlight the influence of cyberfeminism, phenomenology and feminist queer discourse on the artistic representation of (techno)corporeality. The work of four artists will be presented: Isabelle Van Grimde, Jaime del Val, Marco Donnarumma, and Margherita Pevere. The paper demonstrates how their artistic practices provide an anti-normative representation of bodies, while suggesting a horizon for rethinking body politics.

Keywords

Postanatomical; Performative new materialism; Performance art; Digital media; More-than-human

Resumen

Este trabajo pretende examinar las estéticas postanatómicas en el arte de la performance contemporánea a través de los debates nuevo materialistas en torno a las intra-acciones de lo humano y lo tecnológico. Con dicho objetivo, destacamos la influencia del ciberfeminismo, la fenomenología y el discurso feminista y queer en torno a la representación artística de la (techno)corporalidad. Exploraremos el trabajo de cuatro artistas: Isabelle Van Grimde, Jaime del Val, Marco Donnarumma, y Margherita Pevere. Este artículo trata de demostrar cómo las prácticas artísticas generan representaciones anti-normativas de los cuerpos, a la vez que proponen otros horizontes para representar las políticas corporales.

Palabras clave

Postanatómico; Nuevos materialismos performativos; Arte performativo; Digital media; Más-que-humano

Resum

Aquest treball pretén examinar les estètiques postanatómiques en l'art de la performance contemporània a través dels debats nou materialistes entorn de les intra-accions de l'humà i el tecnològic. Amb aquest objectiu, destaquem la influència del ciberfeminisme, la fenomenologia i el discurs feminista i queer entorn de la representació artística de la (techno)corporalitat. Explorarem el treball de quart artistes: Isabelle Van Grimde, Jaime del Val, Marco Donnarumma, i Margherita Pevere. Aquest article tràfic de demostrar com les pràctiques artístiques generen representacions anti-normatives dels cossos, alhora que proposen altres horitzons per a representar les polítiques corporals.

Paraules clau

Postanatómic; Nous materialismes performatius; Art performatiu; Digital mitjana; Més-que-humà

Introduction

Despite the increasing importance of digital media in feminist and queer discourse (Sender and Shaw, 2017), few scholars have devoted their attention to artistic experimentation with technology. Studies on this subject focus on visual arts and technology by paying attention to the often underestimated role of women in media art history (Malloy, 2005). Moreover, no extensive studies have been specifically addressed to digital performance art from a feminist perspective. This lack of knowledge appears particularly relevant since performance art provides a privileged point of view to observe ongoing transformations of the technological body. Furthermore, performing artists have been questioning, since the early 1990s, the traditional boundaries between physical and virtual bodies, desires and identities, thereby partially anticipating the current feminist and queer debate on digital intimacy and non-binarism (Søndergaard, 2017; Suchman, 2017). Informed by phenomenological theories, artists have been addressing issues in new materialist theory by challenging the ways in which contemporary technologies affect bodily perception and representation (Broadhurst and Machon 2012; Choinière, 2018; Kozel, 2007).

Given these assumptions, this paper seeks to provide an original account of performance and digital media by putting into dialogue cyberfeminist tradition, phenomenological approaches to performance art, body and virtuality, and a feminist and queer understanding of technologies. As an artist and academic scholar, I consider it particularly important to shed light on the intersection between practice-based research in the field of performance art and theoretical innovations in post-feminist theories, which have both contributed to forging a new perspective on more-than-human corporeality. In particular, as a practitioner involved in performance and technology, I have observed that while

theoretical notions issued from new materialist theories inform the work of an increasing number of media artists and performers, current debate in the field of feminist new materialism often pays little attention to contemporary artistic creation. Therefore, I consider that focusing on emergent forms of performance art, and its experimentations, can clarify and articulate some important notions – such as embodiment, entanglement, agential realism and situated knowledge – which are fundamental to understanding the present debate in the interdisciplinary area of new materialist studies. In particular, we look at how contemporary performance artists' technological *praxis* can contribute to current new materialist debate on human and nonhuman intra-actions (Barad, 2007). To this end, I examine how digital performance art can develop anti-normative paradigms of corporeality by presenting fluid anatomies and technological alterities. In this context I develop the notion of “postanatomical aesthetics”, which describes the performer's ability to disrupt (human)anatomical norms by embedding more-than-human agencies. By introducing this term, I aim to shed light on the way in which contemporary performance artists propose novel representations of corporeality. I argue that postanatomical aesthetics can be intended as a micro-political critique of normative anthropocentrism that goes beyond classical cyborg paradigms.

From a methodological point of view, a post-feminist approach has been adopted to analyse how emergent technologies can allow for major transformations in the construction of human subjectivity and corporeality thereby questioning normative dualisms. In this sense, our study takes inspiration from the theoretical framework of feminist posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013) and feminist new materialisms (Allhutter et al., 2020). Some core concepts of new materialist research, such as entanglement, diffraction, coadaptation and

intra-action, have been adopted to explore material and somatic features of the performances beyond their ideological inscriptions and discursive articulations (Yi Sencindiver, 2017). In particular, we adopt a performative new materialist perspective (Gamble, Hanan and Nail, 2019) in order to underline how performer and technology are constantly transformed by means of the relation, and how their agency emerges as an outcome of their intra-actions.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first one introduces the debate on the body, technologies, art and feminism from a historical perspective. This section allows the reader to notice the theoretical affinity between phenomenological-based performance art, and cyborg, queer and feminist discourse on digital media. From this perspective, we decided to present a wide historical overview, through key debates and philosophical perspectives to prepare the reader for the discussion of practice in the second section. Moreover, we judged that such a historical survey would provide a useful and comprehensive theoretical background for other scholars who might contribute to the debate with future research. The second part is devoted to the analysis of three case studies that present the notion of postanatomical aesthetics. To introduce this concept, we focus on three artistic performances that have been created in the last decade: Isabelle Van Grimde's *Eve 2050* (2018–19), Jaime del Val's *Microsexes* (2013–17), and Marco Donnarumma and Margherita Pevere's *Eingeweide* (2018). We decided to present four artists to offer the reader a rich overview of the contemporary artistic scene. The last part of the paper discusses theoretical implications of the performances presented. In this framework, we observe how artistic representation of the body can poetically suggest new ways to re-appropriate technologies to promote (bio)diversity, experimentation, and individual

and collective agency beyond normativity. In this sense, the paper provides an original contribution to new materialist research on performance art by shedding light on the influences that contemporary technologies have on bodily affection mechanisms.

Background: Dismantling Binarism in Digital Technology and Corporeality

This section presents an overview of different theoretical paradigms that have questioned the role of contemporary technologies in the construction of human subjectivity. Special attention is paid to the entanglement between body, media and artistic practice. Three main traditions will be discussed: cyberfeminism, phenomenological-based approaches to performance art, and contemporary queer and feminist discourse on digital media. Our aim is to underline how those streams of thought, starting from autonomous points of view and following diverse pathways, generate a coherent critique of binarism. In this regard, we insist on the way in which, since the early 1990s, performance art has depicted a representation of the (techno)corporeality that resonates with some feminist postmodern discourses on subjectivity as a form of becoming and multiplicity (Braidotti, 2002). We argue that this theoretical understanding is necessary for two reasons: on the one hand, it enables a feminist reading of digital performance art, filling the void in the academic literature; on the other hand, it allows for evaluating the artistic-based contribution to new materialist research on technology (Klumbyté and Draude, 2022).

A Non-Binary Understanding of the Technological Body

Starting with Donna Haraway's work (1991), the "cyborg" became a celebrated intersectional archetype to rethink feminism and feminist technoscience through a political

alliance involving humans and technological otherness. In this sense, the cyborg paradigm allowed for a radical critique of patriarchal structures of domination – essentialism, binarism and (hetero)normativity – from the point of view of an ongoing nonhuman corporeality (Balsamo, 1996; Kirkup et al., 2000; McCormack, 2009). This notion has been used as a paradigm of emancipation from the alienating norms that structure cultural-informed representations, thereby opening up to novel conceptions of bodies and identities. Moreover, the cyborg suggested, for the first time, the idea of a liberatory use of technologies through a critical re-appropriation. From this perspective, cyberfeminism paved the way for rethinking the role of women and non-binary people in the history of technological innovation.

During the 1990s, cyberfeminism had a significant influence on art practitioners and scholars. With the diffusion of information and communication technologies feminist artists have used the cyborg paradigm to question the future of body, sex and gender in an environment over-equipped with technology. Orlan is one of the French artists who started exploiting the potential of new digital media in contemporary art practice. *Surgery Performances* (1991–1993) is a series of works in which the artist's face is transformed through the injection of local anaesthetic by plastic surgeons while she reads some pieces of text to her remote audience via a video satellite. Each surgical performance introduces new elements into her face as a composite image. Orlan's body thus becomes a 'virtual' body, characterised by the same malleability and potential for metamorphosis as the body of the digital image. In Orlan's artworks, the figure of the cyborg is evoked to reconsider how emerging technologies transform the boundaries between the living and the artificial, between reality and the imaginary.

Other cyberfeminist artists have focused on how technological engineering affects labour production, social relations and the medicalisation of the body. Art curator and video artist Ursula Biemann proposed a gender analysis of labour at the border between the USA and Mexico. With *Performing the Border* (1998) she shed light on the feminisation of industrial work in Ciudad Juarez by pointing out the related phenomena of sex work and violence. In her documentary, she proposes to understand the transformation of social and economic relations from a cyberfeminist perspective: according to Biemann the female worker is “technologised” since her body turns into a disposable, exchangeable and marketable component. At the same time, the border becomes both a discursive and a material space in which the use of advanced technology can suggest strategies of empowerment.

The importance of the Internet as a field of experimentation for the construction of identity and the creation of communities has been another important topic for cyberfeminist artists since the early 1990s. VNS Matrix was an Australian art-hacktivist collective that denounced patriarchal domination of new technologies by proposing to use cyberspace as a place for constructing sociability, identity and sexuality from a feminist perspective. To this end, they created *ALL NEW GEN* (1992), an interactive video game where the main heroes are non-binary persons who fight against fictional macho characters representing (techno)patriarchal norms.

Broadly speaking, cyberfeminist artists have explored ongoing transformations of the technological body by critically assuming emerging humans-machines companionship: on the one hand, they problematise patriarchal discourses on body, identity and technology; on the other hand, they seek to devise possible ways of opening a new space of signification for women and non-binary

people. In so doing, they provide a radical critique of binarism by adopting text, video and the Internet as the main media of expression.

Performance, Media and Phenomenology

In the same period, an entire generation of performance artists, inspired by phenomenological theories, experimented with interactive digital technologies (e.g. wearable sensors, biofeedback and depth cameras) in the field of dance, theatre and installation. Artists such as Susan Kozel, Ivani Santana, Isabelle Choinière, Thecla Schiphorst, Sarah Rubidge, and Gretchen Schiller, among others, explored the ways in which real-time video and sound feedback can directly affect movement, perception and bodily awareness. The relation between performance art and phenomenology originates from the special attention that both disciplines pay to body, perception and experience (Bleeker et al., 2015, pp. 1–16). As such, they both describe knowledge-making processes as embodied, situated, and relational. In particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy exerted a great influence on performance art and digital media from the early 1990s (Giomi, 2020). According to post-phenomenological critics (Ihde, 2002; Hansen, 2006), Merleau-Ponty's writings about the perceiving body and the technical artifact (1945, p. 168, pp. 262–263) provided a cornerstone for understanding the transformative power and potential of technical mediation.

Inspired by theories of embodiment and chiasmus (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; 1964), the above-mentioned artists developed phenomenological-based approaches to question traditional boundaries between physical and virtual bodies, desires and identities. Their works explored interactive environments and sensorial feedback to

provide the performer (or the audience) with a new somatic awareness and to redefine their habitual perceptions. As such, they shed light on the autopoietic ability of both living bodies and technological environments to affect and be affected.

In her participative performance-installation *Telematic Dreaming* (1992), Kozel spent several weeks in an augmented-reality bedroom by interacting with the image of the spectators visiting the installation. During the performance, she explored how the intimate interaction with digital synthetic images of the Other produces a great variety of physical and emotional reactions ranging from physical pain, fear and sensations of violence to intimacy, tenderness and trust. By reconfiguring the performer's affective and corporeal territoriality, technological mediation provided by screens and projections forces Kozel to be aware of her subjectivity as a transforming flux of flesh, emotions and digital bits.

In Santana's *Corpo Aberto* (2001), the performer dances with her digital shadow, a pre-programmed avatar that reacts in real time to her movements. The digital double acts either as a deformed mirror of the performer or as a totally otherworldly creature according to the digital image processing adopted. In this performance, the interaction provides a perceptible form of connection between the performer's feeling of presence and her sensorimotor exploration of space. This relation is based on multiplicity rather than identity since the performer's sensory and motor geography are constantly reconfigured through the discovery of an ever-changing 'digital alterity'.

In Choinière's dance performance *La démente des anges* (2001), two dancers are remotely connected to each other. By means of motion sensors, each dancer creates sound through distant communication with the other performer. The body is conceived as an

expanded entity capable of providing multisensory communication. In this context, both performers are interdependent since they mutually affect the movement of the other. In this sense, they articulate an intercorporeal and unstable organism capable of sensorial and perceptual reorganisation.

With their pioneering artworks, Kozel, Santana and Choinière, among others, have opened new pathways to rethink technology outside binarism. By focusing on embodied knowledge, intimacy and somatics they conceived mediation technology as a sensory environment capable of affording transformative feedback: by acting on the physical activity, real-time feedback provides a perceptible transformation that alters the performer's usual sensorimotor programmes and affective habitus. In other words, motion sensing technologies function as an active sensory-perceptual mode of experiencing, an organic element within the *autopoiesis* of the corporeality.

Neither explicitly referring to the cyborg paradigm, nor to the feminist perspective, digital performance experimentations echoed major issues of feminist epistemologies: on the one hand, they avoid dualist understanding of the virtual/physical body by considering motion sensing technologies as a connective material for both informational and bodily anatomies; on the other hand, they pave the way for a phenomenological understanding of the technological body based on situated knowledge, embodiment, intimacy and affectivity thereby providing an alternative approach to dominant paradigms of technological efficiency, immateriality, and normativity. Furthermore, by making perceptible the transformative fluctuations between the digital and physical, the outside and the inside, the being-at-distance and the being-close-to-each-other, they suggest understanding subjectivity as becoming process and identity as relational.

Feminist and Queer Approaches to Digital Media and Art Practice

During the last two decades, feminist and queer theories have been underlining the potential of technologies for challenging the patriarchal framework by either revisiting or going beyond the cyborg paradigm (Grebowicz and Merrick, 2013, p. 2). The theme of the technological body became a cornerstone for feminist discourses, therefore underlining a certain 'technophilic sensibility' as one of the distinctive traits of feminist studies of media, biocultures, and technoscience (Smelik and Lykke, 2008). In this context, body practices are increasingly situated and culturally conceived through the prism of technology (Pitts, 2005). Since technological redesign and reconfiguration of bodies and identities became a part of everyday life, the figure of cyborg is often integrated in a posthumanist framework (Toffoletti, 2007) or resituated as a minor member of the companion species family (Haraway, 2016). Furthermore, (techno)corporeality became a central issue for feminist technoscience and feminist media studies: by reconsidering the entanglement of the biological and the technological from a materialist perspective, they provided an alternative framework to social constructivism based on the embodied and embedded material foundation of the subject (Smelik and Lykke, 2008). Similarly, intersectional feminist studies recently pointed out the relation between affect, embodiment, materiality and technology in the context of digital humanities as a means of shedding light on the interactions between power structures and gender (Losh and Wernimont, 2018).

Within the framework of queer theory, the interdependence between body and technology recently gained currency, thereby mobilising a technological turn in queer studies (Murray and Sullivan, 2009, p. xii). In

this context, the postmodern notion of cyborg has been embraced to provide a paradigm of subjectivity that overcomes cultural markers such as race, gender, class or sexual orientation (Carlson, 2001). Since the cyborg inhabits a cultural landscape in which identity borders are blurred, it has been used to identify the queer body as a zone of contestation against heteronormative codes. The figure of the cyborg is adopted as an empowering myth of subversion able to suggest anti-normative cultural practices and politics of representation (Miyake, 2004). Moreover, the cyborg is often considered as a prominent interface between queer theory and posthumanism since it represents a hybrid desiring subject that transgresses both heteronormative and humanist structures (MacCormack, 2009).

Recent studies in queer theory have examined the central role of technologies in understanding intersections between gender, body, sexuality, and media (Sender and Shaw, 2017). Radical approaches have critically revisited the socio-techno construction of gender and sexuality: Legacy Russel's *Glitch Feminism* (2020) proposes to understand the "error" (i.e. all kinds of variance from the white cisgender non-disabled norm) as an emancipatory form of resistance for marginalised people and non-binary digital communities providing an active refusal of heteronormativity; Helen Hester's *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018) presents a technomaterialist and anti-naturalist approach to social, reproductive and pharmacological technologies enabling novel uses of technoscience. From this perspective, technologies could promote the emergence of a post-gender society in which asymmetric power relations are replaced with diversity, inclusivity and community-based governance.

Feminist and queer problematisation of digital media and corporeality have been gaining attention in several fields. However, scholars have only sporadically devoted studies to

technology and artistic practices, and performance art is particularly overlooked. *The Cyborg Experiments* (Zylinska, 2002) – focusing on Orlan and Stelarc's works – can be considered among the first essay collections that capture contemporary transformations of (techno)corporeality in performance art, even though the reference to feminist theories and debates is limited. Informed by phenomenological approaches, Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon's *Identity, Performance and Technology* (2012) maps performance-based practices by investigating the implications of digital technologies on identity re-mediation. The book presents emergent technological practices in the arts, questioning notions of gender, sexuality, race and (dis)ability. Judy Malloy's *Women, Art and Technology* (2003) is the first extended overview on women's contribution to media art history. The book presents a historical survey on female artists' creations – often underrepresented in academic literature – by focusing on the 1960s and 1970s. Malloy's work is particularly important for feminist art studies since it includes 26 papers from renowned women artists presenting their work, their goals and their vision.

In recent years, academic contributions to the field have been increasing. Jennifer Way (2016) proposes a critical examination of feminist approaches to digital art and technological creativity. Informed by social constructivism, her analysis focuses on pioneering digital artists of the 1990s. Kate Mondloch (2018) considers the work of three new media artists – Pipilotti Rist, Patricia Piccinini, and Mariko Mori – from a new materialist perspective by arguing how their multimedia installations share methodological and conceptual premises with feminist frameworks. Legacy Russel's book on *Glitch Feminism* (2020) examines the work of contemporary digital artists such as Juliana Huxtable, micha cárdenas and Kia LaBeija,

which depicts alternative constructions of identity that challenge dominant heteronormative modes of representation. By critically questioning the use of digital technologies in the field of humanities, Kathryn Brown and Elspeth Mitchell (2020) examine the possibility of a “feminist digital art history”. Their work elaborates on principal strategies and methodologies for disrupting conventional art-historical narratives by foregrounding issues of gender and diversity. Furthermore, Judith K. Brodsky’s (2022) contribution maps women and non-binary people’s innovations in new media art history from earlier experimentations with the electronic image to recent digital artworks. Informed by queer theory and intersectional feminism, the book analyses how digital artists transformed technology under the impact of feminist theory. In this sense, the author underlines how digital artists provided new paradigms of technology, overcoming embedded binary values and patriarchal codes.

In these studies, digital performance art is rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, as argued in the paragraph on phenomenological performer artists, digital performance art represents a consistent field of experimentation for observing ongoing transformations of bodies and identities. In the next section, we analyse how contemporary digital performance art inherited the legacy of cyberfeminism, phenomenology and queer theory by providing new poetic horizons for understanding the subject as a fluid becoming of flesh, technological alterities and affects.

Towards a Postanatomical Aesthetics

In this section we present three contemporary artistic performances dealing with body and technological experimentation: Isabelle Van

Grimde’s *Eve 2050* (2019) a choreographic/multimedia work fostering a feminist futuristic vision of the body-technology hybridation; Jaime del Val’s *Microsexes* (2013–2017), an investigation of post-gender identities and surveillance technologies; and Marco Donnarumma and Margherita Pevere’s *Eigeweide* (2018), a sound performance that uses AI (Artificial Intelligence) to critically explore intra-actions between humans, technology and living-others.

To illustrate their artistic approaches to body and technology, we introduce the notion of *postanatomical aesthetics*¹. The prefix “post” refers to postmodern tradition, and particularly to feminist posthumanism (Braidotti 2013). Posthumanism designates several philosophical theories claiming the end of humanism and anthropocentrism; likewise postanatomical refers to a set of aesthetic strategies aiming at deconstructing ‘anatomical’ representations. We are not suggesting that contemporary artists neglect that people are made of bones and flesh. Rather, we argue that postanatomical aesthetics enacts alternative representations of “normative anatomy”, which can be considered as a disciplinary *dispositive* or apparatus (Foucault, 1976). Moreover, we argue that “anatomy” should be conceived as a way of looking at bodies, a perceptive and cognitive filter allowing us to see, represent, and conceptualise corporeality according to a peculiar normative grid. From a feminist perspective, anatomy can be interpreted as a formal representation of the Vitruvian Man (Braidotti, 2013, p. 13): a supposedly universal model of humanity (i.e. a white cis-heteronormative masculine version of the

¹ The term “post-anatomical bodies” was first used by Jaime del Val to describe a body image produced with mediation technologies in which the body become “unrecognizable, only nearly legible, it has no clearly defined anatomy, no binary sex and gender, no recognizable humanity, it proliferates in multiple becomings of sex and species, it is a becoming element and inorganic” (Val, 2009, p. 270).

human), which denies innumerable human specificities – of colour, gender, ability, movement, thought, culture. On the contrary, the performative bodies of Van Grimde, del Val, Donnarumma and Pevere, dissect anatomy to reassemble it into a hybrid configuration of genders, computational machines, inorganic matter and nonhuman organisms.

We further use the term “aesthetics” not only to designate a peculiar trend in contemporary performance art. In this context, the notion of aesthetics points to how postanatomical approaches involve materially engaged practices of perception, movement, affect, sound and vision rather than acting solely at the discursive and linguistic levels. Aesthetics strategies adopted by artists are diverse: from the use of light to reduce body visibility, to the experimentation with digital image, to elicit gender fluid representations, from the use of sound to animate technological machines to the hacking of video and projection for fragmenting bodily integrity and unity. In the next pages, we illustrate such strategies by examining the ways in which these artistic performances suggest possible material configurations of fluid anatomies and technological alterities. In doing so, we further observe how these artistic practices resonate with the new materialist turn in feminist theory (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Hekman, 2010; Ringrose et al., 2020; van der Tuin, 2011).

***Eve 2050* (2019) – Isabelle Van Grimde / Corps Secrets**

Founder and director of Montreal-based dance company *Corps Secrets*, Isabelle Van Grimde² is known for her work with music and new technologies (e.g. *Les gestes*; *Symphonie 5.1*). Since 2008 she has carried out her research-creation practice through focusing

on how digital media and scientific studies can enable different ways of looking at the body. According to Van Grimde, these “new images” of the body can affect, both discursively and materially, the way we move and perceive gestures. In her work, she develops the notion of “primal body”, a concept that resonates with new materialist research: in her view, the performative body must be understood as an articulation of vital matter and vibrations that can be sensibly altered by soliciting uncommon and emergent perceptions. By means of interactive sound, 3D imagery and nonhuman prosthetics, her work explores how technological mediation provides strategies of embodiment, allowing dancers to experiment with new ways to “be a body”. In so doing, this choreographic practice experiments with possible future configurations of the body, and the ways in which dance may inhabit such a “body of the future”.

The “future of the body” and the “body of the future” are the core of the last Van Grimde creation: *Eve 2050*, a triptych involving a web-series, an interactive installation and a performance.³ The work can be considered as an eco-feminist speculative fabulation about how, in the near future, the boundaries of the body and its identities could be redefined. The protagonist is Eve, a symbolic character who is both child and adult, man and woman, female and transgender, flesh and virtual being, evoking diverse cultural and ethnic origins. Each part of the triptych explores a different facet of the work, allowing the audience to adopt a multiple perspective on the body’s futurability. The web-series⁴ provides the main narrative elements of the story: it is set in 2050; during the last three decades technological and biomedical advances have changed the status of the body and redefined identities. Some humans

² <https://vangrimdecorpssecrets.com/en/la-compagnie/isabelle-van-grimde/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

³ <https://vangrimdecorpssecrets.com/en/oeuvres/eve-2050/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/315530984> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

have embraced technological advances, even augmenting their bodies with artificial devices; others have chosen to merge with other living species (animals, plants or bacteria) thereby creating nonhuman hybrids based on biological entanglement; others celebrate the primal, unmodified, body, refusing any corporeal modification or do not have the means to augment themselves.

Eve 2050's narration is expanded in the second part of the work. The interactive installation⁵ provides alternative scenarios of the story, allowing spectators to experience bodily futurable transformations from an embodied perspective. The audience enters a dark empty space with three sculptures (made by Marilene Oliver using body digitization techniques) and three transparent Plexiglas panels. Each panel is equipped with a depth camera that enables audience detection (by means of skeleton tracking techniques) and functions as a digital deforming mirror on which holographic images are projected. By moving towards the panel-screen, the spectators generate interactive computer graphics based on geometrical lines and structures and a 3D point cloud model of the body. Similarly, people's movements interactively trigger sound texture. Each panel offers different image processing, thereby allowing spectators to choose which body of the future they would like to adopt.

The third part of *Eve 2050* is the performance⁶, which embeds several scenic elements of the installation (interactive panels, sound, holographic projections). Visual immersivity is enhanced with large scale projections which cover both stage and dancers. In this last part of the triptych, eight dancers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds perform in an immersive and interactive environment evoking a connected humanity where multiple forms of embodiment

are mobilised: genetic mutations, cohabitation of human and AI, dreams of immortality, human-nonhuman hybridisation, and post-gender evolutionary identities.

From a technical point of view, the combination of image analysis software and motion capture systems (i.e. depth cameras + skeleton tracking techniques) is adopted across the entire triptych. In the web-series the interactive technology is employed to generate the visual effects of the actors' bodies without recurring to post-production techniques. Similar effects are projected on the audience's bodies, as they walk through the interactive installation, and on dancers' bodies who perform within this environment on stage. The described approach to technics can be considered "diffractive" in a materialist sense (Barad, 2007, p. 30) since it shows how the same technology can be re-situated in different artistic contexts (web-series, installation, performance) and enacted by diverse agencies (actors, audience, stage performers). This process, we argue, allows for exploring relational differences of identity which produce unexpected visions of the body. Thus, *Eve 2050* engages its audience in an artistic, aesthetic and ethical investigation on the future of the human being in the age of digital technology – in which biomedical advances and artificial intelligence gain currency – by leading the spectator through the dance, along with futurable transformations of these identities.

The way in which bodies and identities are depicted in Van Grimde's triptych clearly resonates with the "material turn" in postfeminist theory (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008). In *Eve 2050*, the body is central, yet it is not presented as a purely biological entity. Performers' bodies are entangled with technological elements, including projections, sensors, and digital interfaces, creating a hybrid form that challenges traditional boundaries between human and machine. The integration of technology into the dancers'

⁵ <https://vimeo.com/305979936> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15w-XL6LmkQ> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

bodies reflects the material turn's emphasis on embodiment, as it shows the body not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic, material entity that is continuously shaped by its environment, including technological advancements. The work suggests that bodies in the future may be fundamentally altered through their interaction with technology, highlighting the materiality of these transformations. In this sense, *Eve 2050* also engages with questions of materiality by imagining future forms of human embodiment. The use of digital technology to project images onto the performers' bodies, or to create virtual bodies, raises questions about what it means to have a body in a digital age. The performance suggests that bodies are not just organic but can be extended or even replaced by digital forms. This aligns with feminist materialist concerns about the implications of technological advancements for gender and identity. As such, the portrayal of the body as mutable and interconnected with technology can be seen as an exploration of how future bodies might transcend traditional gender boundaries, offering new possibilities for identity and expression.

The material reconfiguration of bodies and identities does not just concern performers. The interactive nature of *Eve 2050*, especially the second part (the installation), allows the audience to engage directly with the performance, becoming part of the digital and physical landscape. From a new materialist feminist perspective, this interactivity can be seen as a redistribution of agency. Agency is not located solely within the human performers but is distributed across the human and nonhuman actors, including audience, digital technologies, and environment. This reflects the new materialist idea that agency is not an inherent property of individuals but emerges from the interactions and relations between various entities.

Van Grimde's approach to the "material turn" engages deeply with the posthuman framework. Drawing on Haraway's concept of

the cyborg, Van Grimde's posthuman bodies can be seen as figures that challenge traditional boundaries between human and nonhuman, natural and artificial. In *Eve 2050*, the dancers and digital elements create cyborg-like bodies, questioning the integrity and autonomy of the human form. This merging of human and machine can be interpreted as a material-discursive practice that destabilizes anthropocentric and humanist narratives, pushing towards a posthuman future where bodies are not just human but entangled with technology and other nonhuman actors. The performance challenges the viewer to consider how these hybrid bodies disrupt traditional notions of identity, gender, and the body, aligning with new materialist feminist critiques of essentialism and binary thinking. The title – *Eve 2050* – suggests a reimagining of the figure of Eve, traditionally associated with the origins of humanity, in a futuristic context. This reimagining can be interpreted as a feminist reworking of origin myths – a feminist speculative fabulation – emphasizing the potential for new forms of embodiment and identity in a technologically mediated future. The work's portrayal of Eve as malleable and interconnected with technology can be seen as a commentary on the constructed nature of gender and identity, challenging fixed categories and highlighting the material processes that produce and sustain them.

Microsexes (2013–17) – Jaime del Val

Jaime del Val⁷ is a Spanish transdisciplinary artist, theorist, and activist who defines himself as nonbinary and nonhuman. Since the 2000s del Val has developed interdisciplinary projects involving workshops, lectures and performances (e.g. *Metabody Forum*⁸) that question contemporary control

⁷ <https://metabody.eu/jaime-del-val/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

⁸ <https://metabody.eu/forum/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

technologies as well as normative conceptions of affect, sex, gender, ability or intimacy (del Val, 2021). Informed by new materialist and posthumanist theories, they propose to challenge algorithmic practices of domination—based on rationalist visual dichotomies—with motion indeterminacy—rooted in proprioception (i.e. the internal, muscular-articular sense of movement of the body). To this end, they carry out technological and performative practices that strive to overcome perspective-based modes of perception (which are considered at the base of reductionist normativity). “Metaformance” is a term used by del Val to define a series of hybrid performances/installations that avoid a geometrical and linear perspective. During “metaformances” both audience and performer can experience an “intra-active environment”, allowing them to perceive movement beyond the Cartesian geometrical space (del Val, 2018, pp. 187–188). Del Val’s performances are based on the use of *Flexinamics*, a mobile and wearable structure made of flexible materials and translucent textiles that blurs the limits of the body. Composed of adaptable modules, the structure becomes an interactive multimedia performative environment for outdoor and indoor spaces that can be configured according to specific performing situations. The modules are attached to the performer’s body (as a sort of augmented kinesphere) allowing them to move freely in space. As such, *Flexinamics* metastructures expand the sense of proprioception into a larger environment through elastic relations: indeed, the body inside the structure is invited to explore unconventional torsions, focusing on the elastic kinaesthetic connection to the structures (del Val, 2021, p. 61). The performer’s body is also equipped with motion sensors, radio microphones and digital audio processing interfaces, that allow it to produce electronic sounds in real time. Further, 3D images are projected either onto

the mobile structure or directly onto the performer’s body.

*Microsexes*⁹ is a metaformance that allows the body to perceive itself through both microcameras placed on the skin and electronic voice processing. Such an “intra-active” (Barad, 2007, p. 33) environment can be experienced either as a performance or as a participative workshop. In the performance, del Val uses surveillance cameras, attached to the hands, to capture and zoom in on different fragments of the naked body. The images, captured by cameras, are livestreamed and projected either on the mobile architecture (*Flexinamics*) or onto a screen. Since the cameras are attached to the hands, they allow del Val to perform body close ups, providing a tactile and amorphous vision of their corporeality. In so doing, mediation technology enacts two different processes of corporeal reconfiguration: on the one hand, it lets the spectator enter a new scale perception in which the skin becomes an expanded territoriality questioning the intelligibility of anatomical boundaries; on the other hand, by looking at particularly body parts (i.e. hand, back, neck, or genitals), close up visions enact a bodily fragmentation which allows the performance of “organs without body” (Žižek, 2004, p. 175) to emerge. In so doing, camera movements offer an ever-changing perspective on a formless anatomy. This body image can be described not only as anti-perspectival (since it disrupts anatomical configuration) but also as nonhuman: the performer’s amorphous skin is immediately perceived as an indeterminate otherness that makes us think about an alien organism made of desire and vital impulses, in which micro-sexes proliferate. Moreover, the use of electronic voices during the performance enhances the perception of an alien landscape, made of multiple, indeterminate

⁹ <https://metabody.eu/microsexes/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

and emergent sexual organs delivering a (nonhuman) sense of intimacy. This amorphous corporeality plays with the spectator's perception in order to challenge normative and binary definitions of biological sex and gender. In fact, the experience of *Microsexes* shows how the technical apparatus we adopt materially builds discursive and perceptive configurations of gender, sex and organisms.

In the participative version of the metaformance, the audience can move within the *Flexinamics* structure and interact with the performer, thereby altering the audio-visual outcome in real time and influencing the performer's movements. In this context, spectators can perceive a complex intertwining between their body, the body of the performer, the responsive audio-visual feedback, and the architectural structure. Such a complex intra-active environment enables the emergence of an unusual perceptive situation in which corporeality becomes a relational field. The experience allows the exploration of anatomical 'misalignments' and subtle micro-deviations from habitual postures and movement trajectories. As such, bodies sense each other proprioceptively rather than in a perspectival way, thereby permitting an affective ecology of co-sensing in which relationality emerges by transcending normative boundaries.

Del Val's work explicitly refers to feminist new materialism both as an onto-epistemological approach and a critical socio-political theory (Allhutter et al., 2020) that they strive to enact by conceiving hybrid forms of participatory artworks that stimulate the audience to explore different ways of seeing bodies and generating relations. In *Microsexes*, del Val radically challenges normative structures of gender and sexuality by emphasizing fluidity and performativity in the identity construction. As such, *Microsexes* is deeply queer in its approach, as it deliberately destabilizes conventional understandings of sexuality and the body: by using technology to create new

forms of bodily expression, the work 'queers' the body, making it a site of multiplicity, shifting identities that cannot be easily categorized within traditional binarism. The term *Microsexes* suggests a multiplicity of sexualities that are not fixed or stable but are instead microscopically proliferating and diverse. As such, the work can be seen as an exploration of the body's potential to embed and enact gender, where the body is not a fixed entity but something that is constantly being performed and re-performed. This resonates with Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity", where gender is understood as a series of acts that constitutes identity. In *Microsexes* the body is a site of continuous performance, where gender and sexuality are not pre-determined but are produced through the interactions between technology, environment and audience.

The way in which del Val uses technology to engage the audience's sensory perceptions and challenge their habitual modes of experiencing the body is directly linked to feminist new materialism's critique of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. By showing how technology can be seen as an extension of the body, rather than a separate or purely external force, del Val emphasizes the entangled nature of human and nonhuman agencies. In this sense, the aesthetic experience proposed in *Microsexes* resonates with Barad's concept of agential realism, and the interpretation of agency as distributed across networks of human and nonhuman actors.

Microsexes, along with other del Val metaformances, immerses participants in experiences that are designed to affect them on a visceral, pre-cognitive level, destabilizing fixed notions of identity and embodiment. By engaging the audience in these affective experiences, del Val disrupts habitual ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, creating a space for new possibilities of becoming. This approach resonates with feminist new materialism's emphasis on the

transformative potential of affect, where affect is not just a psychological or emotional state but is deeply material. It involves the body's capacity to affect and be affected, emphasizing the interplay between the body and its environment. Barad's concept of "intra-action" (2007, p. 33) is useful here, as it suggests that bodies and environments do not pre-exist their interactions but are co-constituted through them. Del Val's work can be seen as a practical exploration of this idea. Their performances and installations often use technology to amplify the body's affective capacities, highlighting how bodies and technologies are mutually constitutive. This interaction underscores the materiality of affect by making visible the ways in which bodies and technologies co-create each other, rather than existing as separate entities. The affective experience here is not merely about feeling; it is about understanding how these feelings are materially generated and how they, in turn, reshape the body.

This last aspect also suggests political implications. In particular, it resonates with feminist new materialism's call for an ethics that recognizes the interconnectedness and co-responsibility of all material beings, acknowledging how affective forces contribute to the formation of subjectivities and the exercise of agency. In this sense, the concept of affect evokes ecological relations, viewing affect as a force that connects bodies to broader environmental and technological systems.

Eingeweide (2018) – Marco Donnarumma and Margherita Pevere

Marco Donnarumma¹⁰ is a performer artist, musician and academic scholar, known for his work involving electronic music, dance

¹⁰ <https://marcodonnarumma.com/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

theatre, performances, and robotic installations. In his work he looks at the links between ritual performance, autonomous computation, and body politics. Since 2014, Donnarumma's research has dealt with the notion of hybridisation, focusing on how human and technological bodies can give rise to a complex ecology in which "experience, psyche, materiality and technology are always in tension with each other" (2017, p. 3). In his performances, human-machine intra-actions are explored by combining performers' bodies with mechanical prostheses, AI systems and bio-physical sensors; a peculiar feature of his practice is the use of muscular electrical and mechanical signals (EMG/MMG) that allow him to interact with sound and lights through muscles contraction. Margherita Pevere¹¹ is a bio artist, performer and researcher whose work is developed at the crossroads of biotechnology, ecology and queer studies. Her artistic practice can be described as diffractive since it combines scientific and research protocols with artistic installations, performances, and collections of plants and animal relics. Pevere studies the transformation of biological and technological matter, questioning how living organisms, and more-than-human agency, can inform the debate on the interconnection between humans and the biosphere in a hyper-technological era.

Donnarumma and Pevere collaborated for the creation of *Eingeweide* (2018)¹², a transdisciplinary performance merging body art, dance theatre, sound art and new media. *Eingeweide* presents two naked creatures immersed in a dark space barely illuminated by LEDs and spotlights revealing performers' bodies and a desolate landscape made of nonhuman relics (coarse salt piles, prosthesis, out-of-body organs, inorganic skins, computer

¹¹ <https://www.margheritapevere.com/> (accessed: 20.01.2025).

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X_mA_Jecds (accessed: 20.01.2025).

servers). An immersive electronic soundscape envelops the scene: low frequencies, granularized sounds, saturation effects, otherworldly voices, and techno-reminiscent percussions. The sound environment theatrically orchestrates and amplifies organic rhythms of the bodies, reverberating them through artificial pulses of light. From a choreographic point of view, the performance focuses on floor work and bodily relation to gravity. The two bodies interact with each other by performing nonhuman postures evoking mysterious quadrupeds. The embodiment of “animality” is especially underlined in the first and the last parts of the performance, during which both performers compose a sort of living, pulsating and trembling sculpture, entangling their bodies and forming a sort of alien chimera. Their physical encounter is further mediated by an AI system that interprets performers' actions, representing therefore a third partner in the performance. The AI system resynthesises salient features of performers' muscular tension (e.g. intensity, rhythm and sudden impulses) to control different audio-visual outputs (e.g. sound generation or LED lights). The AI's behaviour is largely autonomous. The machine 'listens' to muscular tone variations and generates unexpected audio and luminous configurations thereby influencing performers' quality of movement. Performers' physical state is at once 1) a generative input for the signal processing, 2) a way to train machine learning algorithms, and 3) a physically unpredictable reaction to machine indeterminacy. For this reason, both performers and machine behaviours can be considered inserted into a reciprocally adaptive situation: human and technological bodies learn from each other how to affect and to be affected and transform themselves according to the feedback loop generated by their intra-actions. As such, the AI algorithm and performers' actions depend upon each other.

The relation with the AI system is visually embodied by a robotic arm that Donnarumma wears in the second part of the performance. The prosthesis, installed on the performer's face and driven by the AI system, “intently seeks to touch or strike my body as I – akin to an eyeless animal scouting unfamiliar terrain” (Donnarumma, 2020, p. 41). It should be noted that Pevere's face is also covered by a biofilm surface. Since performers' vision is nullified, they both follow nonvisual stimuli to reconfigure their sensor-motricity. Performers' actions thus develop as a slow choreography of muscular contractions and limb twists alternating sudden falls with exploratory runs through the space. The unusual postures and movements adopted by the performers, as well as the presence of nonhuman agencies, leads the audience to perceive amorphous corporealities that overcome normative representations of the human anatomy in terms of gender, sex, ability and normality. Such “abject” beings, made of flesh, desire, light, sound and intelligent machines, inhabit a hybrid territoriality in which fluid anatomies and technological alterities reject disciplinary body politics.

Eingeweide is a powerful exploration of the co-creative, codependent relationships between human and nonhuman entities, thereby evoking several themes from cyborg theory, posthumanism and feminist new materialism. Donnarumma and Pevere's work can be seen as a cyborgian exploration of human/nonhuman entanglement echoing Haraway's suggestion that we are all already cyborgs – hybrids of machine and organism. Moreover, cyborg theory, along with posthumanism and queer theories, critiques the idea of human exceptionalism. In *Eingeweide*, the performers' bodies are literally co-created through their interactions with bioengineered tissues and digital technologies. In this context, human identity and embodiment are not the result of purely human actions but are produced through the

entanglement with nonhuman forces. This de-centring of the human subject aligns with the posthumanist challenge to anthropocentrism and its call for recognizing the agency and significance of nonhuman actors.

The co-creative processes in *Eingeweide* also reflect what Barad calls “material-discursive practices” (2007, p. 132) – the idea that matter and meaning are co-constitutive and that materiality is not separate from but intertwined with discourse. The performance enacts these practices by showing how the materiality of the body, bioengineered tissues, and digital technologies is inseparable from the discourses around identity and embodiment. The work itself becomes a material-discursive practice, where the meanings and identities of the bodies involved are co-created through their interactions with nonhuman elements.

This practice also resonates with Haraway’s concept of *sympoiesis* (2016) – making together – since the construction of embodied meanings in *Eingeweide* can be seen as a sympoietic process where both human and nonhuman agents actively shape and influence each other. As such, bioengineered tissues, sensors, sound feedback and AI are not passive tools but active participants in the creation of the performance, contributing to the emergence of new forms of embodiment and subjectivity. By presenting bodies that are co-created with nonhuman elements, *Eingeweide* suggests a reconsideration of what constitutes a “normal” body (or anatomy) and highlights the potential for new forms of embodiment that resist categorization and normativity.

Furthermore, the work deeply engages with the new materialist concept of “intra-action”. Intra-action is a key concept in Barad’s agential realism (2007, p. 353), which rejects the idea of individual entities that interact with each other as pre-existing independent actors. Instead, intra-action suggests that

entities emerge through their relationships with each other; they do not precede these relationships but are constituted by them.

Similarly, in *Eingeweide*, performers’ bodies are constantly intra-acting with nonhuman elements, e.g. tissues, prostheses, AI, sound, and light, in a way that challenges the boundaries between self and other, organic and synthetic. In this sense, performers, machines and bioengineered tissues are not pre-defined, stable subjects of the performance but are continually reconstituted through their intra-actions. In *Eingeweide*, the performers’ engagement with the technological elements generates new forms of subjectivity that are not fully human, suggesting a postanatomical representation of identities. The performance itself becomes therefore a generative field where new modes of being emerge through the entanglement of human and nonhuman agents.

The intra-actions in *Eingeweide* also suggest possible ethical implications, particularly regarding the boundaries of the body entangled with nonhuman elements. By incorporating bioengineered tissues, prostheses, sensors and AI algorithms into the performance, the work blurs the lines between life and art, subject and object, raising critical questions about the response-ability (Barad 2007) that comes with such entanglements.

Conclusion: Performing New Materialism

In this paper we pointed out the influences of cyberfeminism, phenomenological-based approaches and feminist queer discourses on contemporary performance art. Current approaches to digital performance rework major methodological and conceptual issues of those traditions thereby offering an original perspective on body-technology entanglement: 1) From cyberfeminist reflections, they inherit the idea of using

technologies as a means of exploring reconfigurations and remediations of bodies. In so doing, they adopt a critical approach highlighting the liberatory potential of digital media. 2) From phenomenology, they adopt the centrality of body and perception. As such, digital media are conceived as active sensory-perceptual apparatus altering modes of affection of the embodied subject. 3) Like feminist and queer theories, they foster a nonbinary and intersectional representations of identities, thereby providing an anti-normative approach to body politics.

Shedding light on the influences that contemporary technologies have on bodily affection mechanisms, and emphasising the role of entanglement and coadaptation, the artistic practices we analysed provide a performative understanding of relevant subjects for new materialist research. Methodologically, we observed how they experiment with diffractive practices “to engender creative and unexpected outcomes” (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2021, p. 175). In the work of Van Grimde, del Val, Donnarumma and Pevere, performers’ bodies are infected, altered and polluted by nonhuman others allowing spectators to rethink the nature of ‘being’ as an experimental project in which differences and multiplicities proliferate. As such, they deconstruct normative representations of bodily anatomy to materially reconfigure binary oppositions. However, the nonhuman alterity is not presented as an inert and passive counterpart. Rather, (technological) alterity is able to perform its own agency, thus affecting human agents (either performers or spectators, according to the artistic situation). Furthermore, agency itself is often distributed across human subjects, cameras, algorithms,

sound, screens, sexual fragments, inorganic relics, and bodily-machinic organs, thereby transforming the performers’ (or spectators’) corporeality into a more-than-human assemblage of affect, flesh, metal and data.

These “fluid anatomies” blur conventional distinctions such as body/machine, man/woman, self/Other, active/passive, human/nonhuman, culture/nature, virtual/real. Moreover, they underscore the differences that exist within the same corporeal entity, thereby presenting a corporeality-as-multiplicity. We designate such a fluid and continuously mutating corporeality with the term postanatomical aesthetics. Echoing the new materialist concept of “response-ability” (Barad, 2007, p. 90), postanatomical approaches to performance art implicitly address an ethical claim about body politics. As we analysed, they challenge normative structures of power based on patriarchy and binarism, while they pursue a technophilic yet critical approach to digital media. In this sense, they challenge normative values of efficiency, control, and normality that are embedded in current biotechnologies, artificial intelligence, information and communication technologies. In this regard, they present liberatory uses of technologies by depicting a representation of the (techno)corporeality based on entanglement, intra-actions and hybridity that offers an alternative way of seeing the relationship between human bodies, perception, desire and technological environments. In this way, they propose a ground for critical reflection on the ways in which current technologies can be re-appropriated to promote (bio)diversity, experimentation, and individual and collective agency, suggesting a horizon for rethinking body politics.

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