

# Posthumanism in Art and Science

A READER

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and Susan McHugh

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## INTERVIEW WITH DOO-SUNG YOO

### Organ-Machine Hybrids

JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK

I discovered Doo-Sung Yoo's work as I was continuing to develop my own ideas around the ever-present triangulation between humans, non-human animals, and technologies as understood through art and performance practices. Yoo's work not only reaches across human, animal and technological divides, but also exists at an interdisciplinary crossroads between art, performance, and science. This work is challenging; neither fully utopic nor dystopic, it stretches and permeates borders asking viewers to question what human-animal-techno futures might become.

Yoo's work immediately captivated me, first with his "Robotic Pig-Heart Jellyfish", part of his Organ-Machine Hybrid series that is just that, a hybrid figure that seemed a perfect example of what I was theorizing as "becoming-animate" a mode of reanimating the non-human animal within its human-technological relationship. [...] More recently I have been compelled by his piece "Lie," a series of wagging robotic cow tongues, which has helped me form an argument for technologized animalities as having potential to stage a Rancièrian "dissensus." What I was manifesting theoretically, Yoo was manifesting practically. When I initially reached out to him to ask a clarifying question for a paper I was giving, his detailed and considered response made me want to understand the impetus behind his work even more. [...] This interview has taken place over many months of email exchanges, and I feel it is only a beginning.



FIGURE 43.1. Doo Sung Yoo, *Vishtauroborg Version 3.1: Incompatibility* (2012). Performance: Wearable robotic devices and cow tongues.

Source: Photograph copyright 2012 Cameron Sharp and Doo Sung Yoo.

JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK: Although I am interested in your early experiments with media and human bodies, for this interview, I want to focus mainly on the work you've done with what I would consider 'animality', which I would describe as a consideration of animals for themselves, as they relate to humanity, and how they manifest as a condition in society. With this in mind, how and why did you become attracted to using animals in your work?

DOO-SUNG YOO: Instead of using animals as mere objects in my art, I materialize animals as ontological equivalents with humans and machines—they all become materials that balance with each other. Since I have been engrossed in calculating an equation of intersection between human body and technology in my early work, I have now added one more constant, 'the animal', to the equation. For me, like mathematics sets (such as a subset, complement set, and empty set), these three objects/subjects (human, machine, and animal) allow me to interpret their mutual relationship to my artistic practice to determine what artistic possibilities can be articulated or derived from these correlations.



Human beings always discover benefits from animals and from nature. My *Organ-machine Hybrid* series illustrates scientific trends, such as when medical science, for instance, utilizes pig bladders for regenerating human skin tissue or develops xenotransplants from animal to human, or robotic organ transplantation as well. I believe that the meaning of 'animality' has fluctuated in history and culture, and is subject to change when influenced by technological innovations. Involving animals in my artwork not only motivates me to reinterpret 'animality and humanity' in the technological environment but also allows me to interweave and find harmonies between the three. Many questions are ongoing in my art: what is shared, and importantly, what traits or values are not shared, at the intersections between 'human and animal', 'human and machine', 'machine and animal', and the three sets, 'human, machine, and animal'; how can we apply those constant values of the equations to artistic avenues and artistic interfaces. Respecting Donna Haraway's sense that we can look ourselves in the 'animal mirror', I would like to find humanity in the animal and other living non-human organisms. Simultaneously, I like to probe how technology can be a bridge between animality and humanity.

JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK: I became interested in your work initially through the Organ-Machine Hybrid series, beginning with the *Aqua001.co2: Robotic Pig Heart-Jellyfish* and have since also been writing about the piece *Lie: Robotic Cow Tongues*. What intrigues me is the hybridization of the actual animal part and a technological component to create a new hybrid 'species'. In response to my own discussions of your work (at conferences, for example), the use of animal parts is sometimes critiqued. How might you respond to questions of the use of animals to facilitate new affiliations between animals-humans-technologies? And to follow up, how important is the use of the actual animal in the work you develop?

DOO-SUNG YOO: Although I have used live animals, such as fish and leeches, in some of my work, I have mainly used parts of flesh and organs from edible and discarded parts of domestic animal bodies (mostly cows and hogs) that are easily purchased at butcher shops, groceries, and slaughterhouses. This application of 'animal' parts in my artwork differs slightly from other artists who might use the whole animal. The disembodied parts of animals—the meat and organs—are also in the context of food and the waste of animal industry. I am not an animal activist, but in comparing 'art animals' and 'industry animals', it is worth remembering that numerous animals are killed

and trashed on machine belts, and the surplus from slaughterhouses is used for processing food and producing further commodities in clothing, cosmetics, ointments, and so on. These are equally disrespectful and disgusting practices behind the scenes of industries that most people are not aware of, or willing to pay attention to when thinking about food. My works remind people that we use animals in our everyday life and position them in art where they can be hybridized with humans and machines for further artistic and scientific benefits, not just traditional nutritional or industrial 'benefits'.

Although I do not agree with, for example, Tinkebell's self-justified killing of her cat to turn it into an art object in *My Dearest Cat Pinkeltje* (2004), and I would not like to drink or eat the human breast milk and cheese from Jess Dobkin's 'The Lactation Station' (2006) and Miriam Simun's 'The Lady Human Chees' (2011), I applaud the artists' challenges to think about a new vision: how can we do away with stereotypes in order to better understand consumable animals? How can human bodily substances become items for human consumption beyond the baby-momoligopoly or physical human-organ transplants? There are many things right in front of us that we do not notice, and we should rethink and reassess our understanding of these systems. Artists (including myself), scientists, engineers, and researchers are able to show these invisible opportunities and possibilities to ask: How can we view the increasingly multifaceted issues of using animals and then shift our relationships with them based on these new views? [ . . . ]

JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK: Based on your explanation about *Pig-bladder Clouds in Rainforest*, in the piece, if animals are hybridized and their body parts used and assembled as your performances imply, how is this beyond an animal dystopia? Is a techno-utopia one in which we hybridize animals, or is this actually a technodystopia?

DOO-SUNG YOO: Obviously, there is no such thing as a true or perfect utopia and dystopia. These notions are ideal states and cannot be achieved in the real world. (Actually, the etymology of utopia means "not" + "place" and this can be interpreted as synonymous with "fantasy" or "not real" which is how I use "utopia" in my work.) We have seen so many different attempts at utopia in our historical, political, economic, cultural, ethical, and religious circumstances that have caused much suffering. The real problem is that once we choose a system of thought for utopia, we act towards the achievement of the ideal and forget about the consequences of our actions. We have a delusional, self-righteous confidence that we are right and that we are helping others.



There are many instances how pursuing utopia has created a dystopia that coexisted in the cause and consequences. For example, John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872) illustrates the idea of Manifest Destiny, in which constructing an American utopia stands on the other side of exterminating American bison and destroying the Native Americans' commissary and other life necessities, so as to provide food to construction workers on the Western railroad, and entertain hunting excursions.

I am using utopia and dystopia as metaphors and tropes to signal certain ways of thinking about relationships between humans, animals, and technology. I allow these ideas to play and dance in my performances. Then, audiences can think about how animals relate to humans and technology in a utopian or dystopian context. Humans and animals, for instance, can enhance each other through biological and genetic symbiosis, and machines can be powered by organic material and hybrids, such as biofuel (animal fats for biodiesel) and neurorobotics. We cannot fully escape our human condition to eat and use animals due to the human's intrinsic instinct to feed and kill its prey as a natural predator. Accepting this fundamental human trait, we can acknowledge that the animal-utopia is not possible within the human world.

Articulating my fantasy world is neither a true animal-utopia nor classical human-utopia, but it would be a sort of secular-driven proposition of utopia, an approximation or resemblance of a utopia in which the anthropocentric attitude for utilizing animals still inevitably exists at the level of survival and sustainability, but in a situation of minimized influence from humanity. My performances create a secular ritual mood, which tries not to disrespect animals, but rather to elevate them through the atmospherics of performance. This ritual does not need to be religious, but the devotional mood encourages respect in the audiences' feeling for the sacrificed animals, such as edible animals and laboratory animals, which in my work are technologized and genetically reincarnated into an artificial life. This simultaneous existence of ideal (imaginary) and real states in my performing contexts is "a kind of effectively enacted utopia" of Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, which is "simultaneously mythic and real". My techno-utopia would not be on either side of the argument—*for* or *against* animals, instead, my emerging techno-utopia involves binary oppositions with ambiguous boundaries: where forms are mixed and interlinked without traditional norms (like in Foucault's heterotopia); where whole things are interconnected and where we balance between nature and force as a perspective in Taoism; where we



deconstruct classical utopian ideology of traditional humanism as a perspective of posthumanism. My techno-utopia stands on the point of ideal balance between utopias of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, technocentrism, and others (heterotopia) rather than a single dominating utopia. All of those discourses question how “utopia” can be reinvented and reassessed without the binary opposition split. The 6th century philosopher and Zen master Seng-ts’an sums up my conceptual position, “If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between for and against is the mind’s worst disease”.

JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK: In your early interactive work you explored cyborgean concepts, for example, using the living performer to dance with an animated robotic heart in your 2002 performance in Seoul, *The Dynamic and Vital Media*. You describe this on your web site as illustrating ‘the expanding humanization of media’. Do you feel media has been increasingly humanized or has it done the opposite—mediatizing humans? How has this early fascination with the cyborg developed as you’ve incorporated animality into your work?

DOO-SUNG YOO: Technology and humanity are like the two sides of a Mobius strip: while they are interconnected and actually part of the same thing, they are still separate. We control and are controlled by technology in a never-ending loop. Media (technology) has been increasingly humanized. The current Body Area Network (BAN) and Internet of Things (IoT), such as wearable and mobile technology on human bodies, are good examples that show how media has become an intimate interface for human use. When we return to the starting point on the strip, however, we are faced with the other side in which we are subordinated by technology. Technology is also a powerful interface to mediatize humans in politic, capitalistic, social, and cultural agendas.

I admire video artist Nam June Paik’s standpoint toward humanizing technology, which suggests to us how we view technology’s confrontation between ‘control’ and ‘controlled’. In the globally broadcasted video, art via satellite, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), Paik denied George Orwell’s dystopian vision that Big Brother’s (telescreens) omniscient power dominates and mediatizes every citizen in a novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Rather, Paik celebrated that humans positively use media to interact with all global communities, which is now much more common in the current world of social media. Moreover, Paik has suggested we can intimately

objectify media through humanistic approaches of using technology in his video sculpture series, including *TV Bra (TV Bra for Living Sculpture, 1969)*, *TV Garden (1974–2000)*, and *TV Bed (1972–1991)*, which look like origins of current BAN and IoT. I agree with Paik's vision that technology's capability positively enables us to 'liberate people from the tyranny of TV' [which I would broaden to include the categories of media, technology, and power], although are we still in the Mobius strip when encountering different controversies about capitalistic, political media tyranny, such as Apple's iPhone Backdoor security and National Security Agency (NSA)'s global surveillance. Likewise, technology can be developed and applied for good or bad by humans' desires and greed in the endless strip; the duality of the strip reflects the duality of humanity. [. . .]

JENNIFER PARKER-STARBUCK: There has been a lot of discussion and debate over the term 'posthuman' from Katherine Hayles to Cary Wolfe to Rosi Braidotti, and each have their own ideas about what this term means and what its importance is. What do you mean when you use this term? What is its importance to you?

DOO-SUNG YOO: The concepts of my bio-art and robotic performance are mainly based on the notions of posthumanism. When I launched the organ-machine hybrids in 2007, my art concept began with the notion of transhumanism, which asserts that technology enables humans to radically exceed their biological and physical forms and capabilities beyond the conventional limitations. My early hybrids are mainly focused on visual metaphors of augmented bodies in electronic sculpturing forms. However, in adding more technical functions for human-machine interactions in future hybrid characters I needed to further research the philosophy of posthumanism to get out of my artistic rut, where I was stuck focusing on the prowess of technology and material forms. Through looking at the meaning of posthuman, I confronted the fundamental considerations and ontological questions of re-identifying new human roles and reassessing humanism *alongside* technology, beyond the mere physical transformation in nature, or as a posthuman being in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, as an artist, I have been considering what aesthetic points artists could derive from human evolution, such as becoming a posthuman entity and entering into new relationships with other species.

I support the fundamental change of concepts about humanism within posthumanism, which have been celebrated in my art. My human-animal-machine hybrid, *Vishtauborg*, is based on the destruction of traditional



humanity by disintegrating the binary boundaries between human and animal, and human and machine. In the *Vishtauborg* performance, the human performer is not a privileged being in the artistic collaboration with the organ-machine. Sometimes, the performer's improvisatory choreography was controlled by the organ machines reactions, and sometimes vice-versa, which created harmonized motions in real time. This equivalent relationship illustrates Katherine Hayles' positive view of human's high consciousness and intelligent machine's partnership in our ongoing development of cognition environments. Cary Wolfe's cynical views on human superiority and Rosi Braidotti's feminist technological thinking alongside multiple-identities are also significant notions which I applied to *Vishtauborg*'s visual metaphors in hybridizing human/animal-parts/machine and human performers' androgynous characteristics. Humans are no longer standing atop a hierarchy in the theatrical mise-en-scène in order to destabilize hierarchical relationships between human/robot, human/animal, and male/female.

The notions of posthumanism will continually guide me in how I can view and understand humanity and humanism through the lens of technology. My artistic work will share Wolfe's wariness of the 'intensification of humanism', in which technology can only be used for human being's augmentation. In my work, I use technology for new paradigms of humanism outside of the anthropocentric stance. Following those posthumanists' concepts, I would like to continually probe what new human roles are, what new human responsibilities are, what new human life-forms are, and to discover new norms and standards in the coexistence of living entities and technology.