

Chapter 6

Humanness, Elevated Through its Disappearance

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ABSTRACT

Developments in electronic communications are drastically changing what it means to be human and to interact with humans. The value of recent technological developments to artists is more than doing more, faster and better; it is also the ability to highlight and elevate humanness in new ways through art, even by appearing to replace the real with the virtual. New tools don't simply replace humans, they allow human creators to shift into new realms of creation: creating dynamic systems and worlds instead of static products. This chapter will give consideration to the different types of presence manifest in various communications formats, stage presence in technology-mediated performance, and several artworks that bring new light to the artist's approach to virtual worlds as a kind of counterpoint with reality.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is changing so quickly that it is difficult enough to keep up with the changing landscape of digital communications for personal or business needs (McPhail, 2006). It is more difficult but crucial to take time to contemplate the impact besides new or improved abilities. Developments in electronic communications are drastically changing what it means to be human and to interact with humans, and it is critical to

understand this impact, lest we all lose our humanness amidst so much progress.

It is important to remember that the idea of technology shaping art is not limited to the twenty-first or twentieth centuries. In my own discipline, music, steel frames and strings and standardized tuning systems did not just make music easier to perform or present to audiences, they significantly changed what composers wrote in past centuries. There has always been technology, and the same goes for virtuality. The idea of virtuality is essential to art: every work that is fictitious or demands attention for non-utilitarian purposes

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presents some virtual thing to be made whole by the viewer's "suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge, 1817/1985). Even as technology makes virtual experiences more realistic, the viewer is asked to bridge an *uncanny valley* (Mori, 1970) in order to fully enter the world of the artwork. Even though it seems reasonable to equate the virtual with the imaginary or synthetic in contrast with real or natural things, virtuality is in fact quite natural for human minds: Plato's forms, Immanuel Kant's a priori reasoning, and Erwin Schrödinger's cat are all virtual constructions.

So, basically all art is virtual. This is not the focus of most art, but many works from the twentieth century and later have explored this virtuality by challenging the basic assumptions of the artist and the audience, for example, John Cage's composition "4'33'" (1952/1967). It consists of three sections, all silent. The content of the work is void, and the only sounds heard are those sounds from the environment and audience that audiences have learned to ignore in live performance. In the virtual world of this composition, there is only a mirror that reflects things from outside its world. Such challenging works and overtly virtual technology-based artworks create tension between the viewer's sense of the virtual and the real. The value of recent technological developments to artists is more than doing more, faster and better in mundane activities; it is also the ability to highlight and elevate humanness in new ways through art, even by appearing to replace the real with the virtual. Rather than simply accepting technology-assisted abilities or lamenting technology replacing human, analog, and physical things, artists have the opportunity to explore a grand territory. New tools don't simply replace humans, they allow human creators to shift into new realms of creation: creating dynamic systems and worlds instead of static products. The artist can use algorithms to build a "painter" instead of directly placing each pixel in a single work; the composer can compose the *act* of composition itself instead of placing each note. This chapter

will give consideration to the different types of presence manifest in various communications formats. A study of electronics and stage presence in live musical performance will illuminate a human sensitivity to authentic, live experience. This will bring new light to the artist's approach to virtual worlds as a kind of counterpoint with reality. A survey of approaches to virtuality will be discussed in terms of humanness lost and elevated and will be summarized in a basic classification.

BACKGROUND

Mediation refers to something coming between two other things, or for the purpose of this chapter, the intervention of communications technology in the path between sender (performer or artist) and recipient (viewer). The term *mediatize* was first used to describe the annexation of one nation by another, in which the leader of the annexed nation maintains his or her title and sometimes some authority. More recently, Jean Baudrillard (1981/1994) has adopted the term to discuss the transformation of events when they are recorded or transmitted by communications technology, originally to highlight more overt or intentional kinds of transformation of the symbols in play. It has come to be used by others in a more general way highlighting any result of the process of recording or transmitting once-live events. (Auslander, 1999) In this chapter, *mediation* refers to the intervening position of technology, and *mediatization* refers to the effects of that intervention (in the general way without Baudrillard's embedded implications).

It is interesting, however, to reconsider the original definition of mediatization. It already contains senses of both emasculation and preserved identity. In all senses of the word, the mediatized object becomes a reference to the original but loses its authenticity. In the mediatization of live events through technology, what is lost is the *aura* as Walter Benjamin (1936/1960) described it, the sense of authenticity that comes from witnessing

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