

dont la prééminence et le déclin final coïncidaient presque exactement avec la vie de la comtesse Greffulhe, *La mode retrouvée* se réappropriait une mode perdue en évoquant l'admiration et le désir générés par l'image publique hautement cultivée du personnage, tout en ayant un regard critique sur les moyens mis en œuvre pour la produire.

Traduit de l'américain par Michèle Veubret

## Post-Humannerism

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"Inhuman"

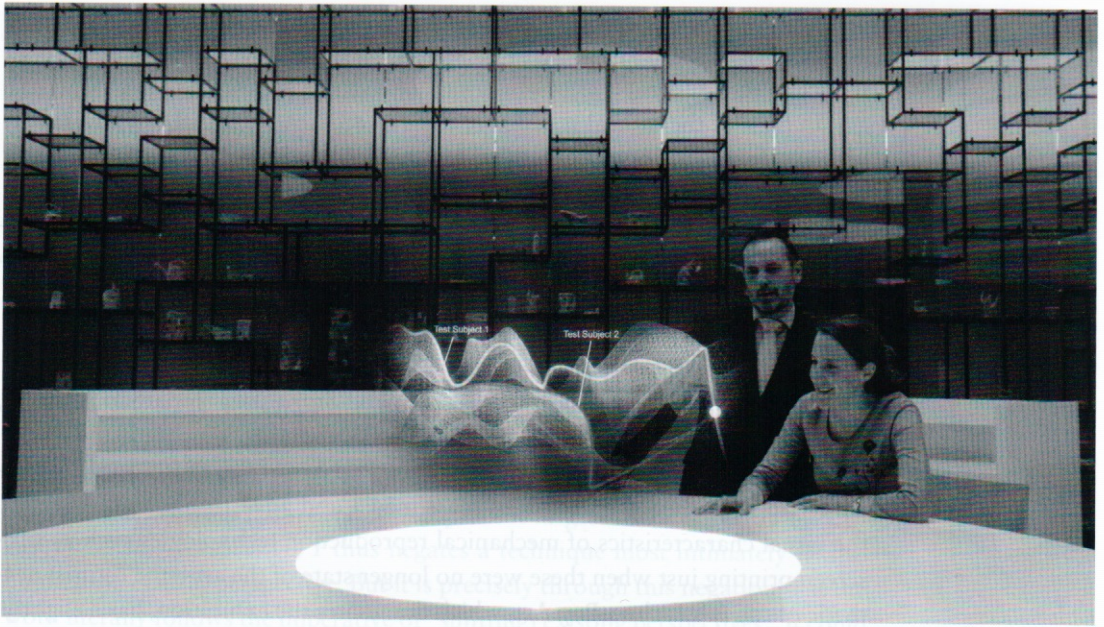
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With its diagnosis that the human has become moldable in the course of technological developments, and with its call for a redefinition of the human through art, "Inhuman" situates itself within a larger discourse which, after the death of the author and the end of the subject, has for the past decade been proclaiming the disappearance of the human as such. In the wake of recent developments in science and engineering, their reception within the humanities and arts has engendered a programmatic historicization of the human under the banner of the "anthropocene," ubiquitous talk of "post-humanism," and the rejections of humanist "correlationism" grouped under labels such as "speculative realism" or "new materialisms." "Inhuman" is the third iteration of an exhibition that, with the title "Speculations on Anonymous Materials," began in the fall of 2013 to connect a number of emerging artistic positions with these current discourses about the human and her supposed end. The exhibition's post-humanist ambition is formulated right at the beginning in an introductory wall text stating that "the artists participating in the exhibition 'Inhuman'" reflect "the human being" first of all "as a [...] body"<sup>1</sup>—i.e. they define the human not, as the humanist tradition did, by her spirit. What remains of the human after the subtraction of this metaphysical surplus is a thing amongst other animate or inanimate things. For even if the curatorial statement does not explicitly negate spirit or subjectivity *per se*, the latter are nevertheless understood as fundamentally embodied and therefore can no longer figure as the origin, but only as products of physical processes. In the explanatory notes accompanying Anicka Yi's *Le Pain Symbiotique* (2014), for example, thinking, once the defining and exclusive feature of the human, dissolves into concrete and measurable "cognitive processes," whose material substrate are

1. Susanne Pfeffer (ed.), *Inhuman*, exhibition booklet (Kassel: Fridericianum Museum, 2015), 6.



Melanie Gilligan,  
*The Common Sense*,  
2014-15, still

no longer only human cells, but also microbes—at a ratio of 1:11.<sup>2</sup> Radicalizing Jacques Lacan’s famous mirror stage, the human thus conceived loses her imaginary unity and disintegrates into a “biotope” of “circa ten million” microorganisms.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the notion of a “self” is henceforth placed in quotes and thus marked as no less overcome than the humanist conception of man that it founded.<sup>4</sup>

“Inhuman” fundamentally questions not only the difference between the human and the animal or the organic more generally, but also that between human and machine. The apostrophized “self” can be technically implemented and becomes “digitally immortal,” as for example in Cecile B. Evan’s *Hyperlinks or It Didn’t Happen* (2014).<sup>5</sup> Analogously to the disintegration of thought into cognitive processes largely borne by microbes, language itself—the supposed medium of thought—is reduced to binary code, i.e. to machine language, as Pamela Rosenkranz’s *Living Colors* (2012) demonstrates. The work’s video track—in reference to the so-called “Brainbow” project of mapping neuronal circuits—fades monochrome color fields into one another, while the soundtrack reproduces a female voice repeating the same words, “yes” and “no,” over and over again, constantly alternating accentuation and pitch. The distinction between the machine’s binary logic and the infinite variability and nuances of human expression is revealed to be illusory. While the tonal modulation suggests an excess of meaning transcending the binary values of yes/no, and a subjectivity as its origin, it is in fact a synthetic voice called “Heather” exploiting

2. Ibid., 15.

3. Ibid. The German version of the booklet says “one hundred trillion” microbes.

4. “How does this impact on traditional concepts of the human ‘self,’ which are defined above all in contrast to the non-human ‘other?’” Ibid.

5. Ibid., 6.

its entire intonation spectrum as it repeats over and over the binary code. The presumed infinite expressive range of human intonation turns out to be fully reducible to 0 and 1.

In light of the radical transformations of all areas of social and individual life that “Inhuman” points out, the exhibition looks surprisingly traditional. The works on view present not only familiar images, motifs, and aesthetics, mostly derived from science fiction movies; they also employ established artistic procedures, most of all appropriation, and quasi-surrealist juxtaposition, as well as so-called “research-based” methods which unfold their narratives mainly in the supplementary texts accompanying the works. It is mostly the appropriated material—for example representations of “HeLa cells” or props of sci-fi classics such as *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Surrogates* (Jonathan Mostow, 2009)—as well as imaging techniques such as 3D rendering, which lend the works their futuristic look and feel. Not unlike the Pop Art of the 1950s and 1960s—which appropriated the images of mass media and advertising, and above all the visual characteristics of mechanical reproduction technologies such as silk-screen printing just when these were no longer state of the art—the futurist aesthetic of today’s Techno-Pop Art, which dominates the exhibition, has a slightly nostalgic rather than an in- or post-human look-and-feel to it.

As the wall text explains, the exhibiting artists “reflect”<sup>6</sup> and “rethink”<sup>7</sup> the new, inhuman mankind; their works “question” and “shift existing perspectives.”<sup>8</sup> What is in fact exhibited and thereby produced is thus not the “inhuman,” but rather the classical humanist subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> For as the post-humanist discourse evoked by “Inhuman” is right to maintain, so-called man in her humanist constitution is not the ahistorical, immutable origin of all history, but is herself historical. The differences between subject and object, nature and culture, human and animal or machine are indeed by no means “natural,” i.e. given, but artificial through and through; they have to be produced. One important technique for the production of these differences and thus of the human is the museum exhibition as the central operation of a deeply humanist art dispositif. For it is by exhibiting and comparing artworks that innovations, references, and relations between them are identified, those differences between artworks in short, which are seen as evidence of the artist’s subjectivity and which thus produce the artist as humanist subject—as *the* human par excellence. Since subjectivity is a metaphysical and thus immaterial entity, it cannot be found in the material world; it can only be imagined as the origin behind concrete manifestations. But because nature or machines also produce things, subjectivity—as that which defines the human—cannot prove itself through just anything. Only “original” products such as works of art—i.e. artifacts which are not the result of a program,

6. Susanne Pfeffer (ed.), *Inhuman*, Exhibition booklet (Kassel: Fridericianum Museum, 2015), 3. Translation by the author.

7. *Ibid.*, 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. Cf. For the exhibition as production site of subjectivity: Boris Groys, *Logik der Sammlung: am Ende des musealen Zeitalters* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1997), particularly 9–13.



be it genetic code, instincts, the laws of physics, an algorithm, or cultural conventions—qualify as indices of subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> The “originality” of these manifestations in turn can only be identified by way of comparison: exhibitions, art criticism, and art history are techniques of such comparison. From a structural point of view, the “shift[ing of] existing perspectives” is nothing else than innovation, the authorization of new and different products, and only this innovativeness makes the works “original” and can prove that the artists have indeed “reflected”<sup>11</sup> and “reth[ought]”<sup>12</sup>—that they are humans who differ from machines and other organisms, which are traditionally thought incapable of thought as much as of originality.

This principle is explicated most pointedly by Jana Euler’s *under this perspective, 1* (2015), which in many ways stands out from the exhibition. The painting of a female nude is meticulously constructed according to geometric rules, only it inverts those of traditional pictorial representation, so that what is furthest away from the spectator occupies the largest surface area on the canvas. *under this perspective, 1* thus negates a technique most intimately tied to humanism: central perspective. But it is precisely through this negation that the work literally follows the imperative of “shift[ing] existing perspectives.” It could be argued that such a break with conventions is already familiar—for example from Cubism—and therefore not precisely original. But *under this perspective, 1* renders this breaking with the humanist perspective itself ironic, mocking the gendered dimension of both the convention of perspective and of its avant-garde transgression, and thus re-establishes difference with regard to this by now conventional gesture. Irony here proves to be an effective means of producing originality and the subjectivity-effect under the difficult condition of increasing conventionalization.

The artist—whether innovative or ironic—is therefore the epitome of the so-called human that constitutes humanism’s point of origin and reference. This is manifest in the critical reception of “Inhuman,” for example when it exclaims that the exhibition is “inspired”<sup>13</sup> by the artists, i.e. literally endowed with spirit, or when it celebrates the “imagination of art.”<sup>14</sup> For imagination is yet another term for precisely that human quality, which defines so-called man and is emblematically concentrated in the figure of the artist. It is fitting that an oak tree in front of the Fridericianum reminds the visitor of Joseph Beuys’ famous identification of human and artist: Beuys’ credo remains valid not only for this one

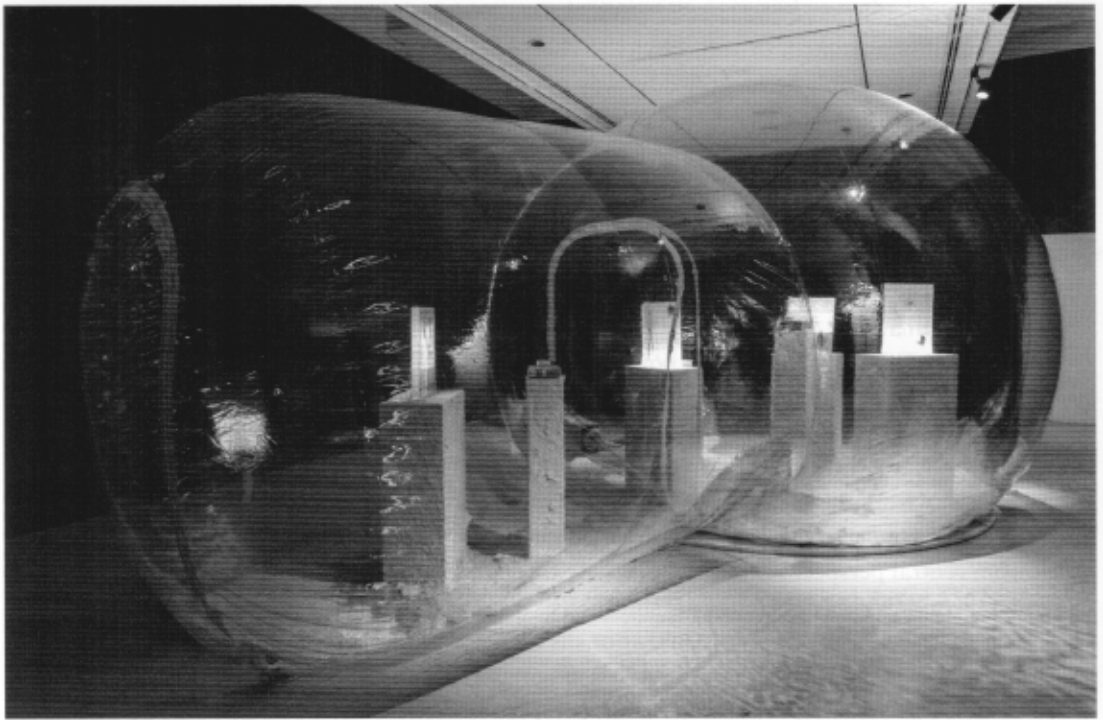
10. As Rosenkranz’s *Living Colors* demonstrates, the artwork itself may well be or make use of an algorithm—what matters is that it has supposedly not been created by one.

11. Suzanne Pfeiffer (ed.), *Inhuman*, op. cit., 3. Translation by the author.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. Rudolf Schmitz, “Zukunftsfeld Mensch-Technik – Ausstellung ‘Inhuman’ Im Fridericianum Kassel,” in *Swr.online*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.swr.de/swr2/kultur-info/ausstellung-inhuman-im-fridericianum-kassel/-/id=9597116/did=15317324/nid=9597116/k7hetz/index.html>. Translation of the author.

14. Thomas Assheuer, “Ausstellung ‘Inhuman’: ‘Achtung, DNA-Attacke!’,” in *Die Zeit*, April 26, 2015, sec. Kultur, <http://www.zeit.de/2015/15/ausstellung-inhuman-biotechnik-kassel-fridericianum/komplettansicht>. Translation of the author.



Anicka Yi,  
*Le Pain Symbiotique*,  
 2014 (exhibition  
 view, "The Great  
 Acceleration," Taipei  
 Fine Arts Museum,  
 Taipei)

exhibition, but is emblematic of the entire art dispositif that "Inhuman" embodies. Accordingly, the installation *Le Pain Symbiotique* is, despite its biologically substantiated relativizing of "self" and human, not attributed to roughly ten million microbes, but to the one artist Anicka Yi. The "anonymous materials" gathered in the previous, eponymous exhibition "Speculations on Anonymous Material" were similarly each attributed to an artist, who demonstrated her or his subjectivity through original selection and artistic repurposing. If the technological transformations of culture at large produce anonymous materials, as artworks they lose their anonymity.

The exhibition presents and (re)produces not only the subjectivity of the artists, but decidedly addresses its visitors as human subjects. Whoever wanted to actually address said microorganisms would likely employ not exhibition displays and brochures, but pro- or antibiotics. While "the primacy of the human being" is "question[ed] [...] at a fundamental level,"<sup>15</sup> dogs and other non-human animals are of course not allowed in the exhibition. Visitors are expected to behave at their most human: they are to pass judgments of taste or at least to interpret the works and participate in the production of meaning. For even if wall texts

15. A notable exception to this seemingly ubiquitous rule was dOCUMENTA (13), which not only explicitly allowed dogs to the exhibition, but offered guided tours for dogs and even comprised artworks designed primarily for canines.

and brochures provide clues, it is implied—and at times stated explicitly<sup>16</sup>—that these are merely possible interpretations. Each interpretation leaves an irreducible excess of meaning, which allows and even calls for the infinite continuation of the process of interpretation. This is why the coexistence of diverging interpretations within art criticism is perceived not as a problem, as would be the coexistence of contradictory statements in the natural sciences or in an algorithm, but on the contrary as highly desirable. It simply isn't about finding the correct and conclusive interpretation; rather, works of art allow critics and visitors to find original interpretations in turn, and thus to manifest their own subjectivity.

The exhibition dispositif thus comprises an enormous hermeneutic apparatus, consisting of symposia, wall texts, supplementary and didactic materials, catalogues, criticism, guided tours, and informal conversations. This ensemble of techniques, media, and infrastructures continues to (re)produce so-called man in the humanist sense. For in addition to her “creativity” or “originality,” the human as bearer of subjectivity is defined by the fact that—as opposed to all other organisms and machines—she processes not only information and matter, but also meaning. The exhibition is therefore a paradigmatic site of the production of human subjectivity. In short: precisely by critically reflecting the far-reaching transformations currently occurring within all areas of society, from economics and politics to health, reproduction, and sexuality, art itself, as it presents itself paradigmatically in “Inhuman,” conserves—or rather constantly produces anew—the human expunged from all other fields.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, however, there are indicators of the formation of a different art dispositif. In early 2014, a “partnership between a data scientist, a financial engineer and an art professional”<sup>18</sup> launched the art metrics service ArtRank. It offers art investors trading advice based on the algorithmic correlation of data, which index “presence, auction results, market saturation, market support, [gallery] representation and social mapping,” promising “a 4200% return on investment over a 16-month period.”<sup>19</sup> The segment of the art world in which ArtRank operates has attracted significant attention. Writing in the *New York Times*, Scott Reyburn coined the term “Flip Art” to refer to the particular brand of abstract painting bought and re-sold—or “flipped”—quickly in “the speculative lower end of the market.”<sup>20</sup> At a high frequency of “flips,”

16. To stick with the previous example, the entire educational and discursive program of DOCUMENTA (13), for example, was run under the banner of “maybe,” because “art and artistic research often avoid any form of stable meaning,” because of “the impossibility of reducing art—and any other complex form of knowledge—to a single explanation, question, subject matter, or paradigm.” “The Maybe Education and Public Programs of DOCUMENTA (13),” accessed July 26, 2015, <http://d13.documenta.de/#/programme/?m=n&L=0>.

17. I owe this observation to Philipp Kleinmichel, the dialogue with whom has strongly informed this text.

18. “Frequently Asked Questions - ArtRank,” accessed January 2, 2015, <http://artrank.com/pages/faq>.

19. Ibid.

20. Scott Reyburn, “Hot New Artists, Getting Hotter,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/14/arts/international/hot-new-artists-getting-hotter.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/14/arts/international/hot-new-artists-getting-hotter.html?_r=0).

profits can be spectacular: works by Oscar Murillo, for example, were priced between \$2,500 and \$8,500 in 2011; in 2013, 24 of his works generated \$4.8 million total at auction. "As traders seek to lock up profits, a picture can change hands five or six times within a year," art investor Stefan Simchowicz explains.<sup>21</sup>

Alongside a high frequency of contemporary art auctions, remote-bidding, price-databases, and other art market indices, ArtRank is part of an apparatus that circulates artworks as speculative assets. As a distribution system, the market has of course always been part of the humanist art dispositif and constituted its economic base. But the oft-cited "dealer-critic system," as Ulf Wuggenig has shown, always referred to and depended on the museum.<sup>22</sup> As its name suggests, it coupled distribution with interpretation in order to maintain an irreducible difference between the artistic value of ultimately "priceless" works of art and their actual prices. As opposed to this, at the center of the auction-ArtRank system is not the interpretative production of immeasurable excesses of meaning as the vantage and reference point for the price of priceless works, but the calculation and realization of concrete prices that refer solely to other prices. The decisive difference is here not that between price and artistic value or excess of meaning, but that between buying price and price of sale. The emblematic gravitational center of this system is therefor no longer the museum, but the free port, in which artworks are invisibly locked away, permanently in transit, suspended in continuous circulation. Its primary operation is not the exhibition, which generates meaning and subjectivity, but the transaction, which defines prices.

This does not of course mean that there are no more exhibitions, reviews, and museums. On the contrary, their numbers seem to be ever increasing. But as a globalized art industry is inflating further and further, and as reception increasingly means recirculation, new techniques for coping with the resulting flood of information are taking hold. Interpretation increasingly gives way to a statistical mode of processing. With its focus on statistics and metadata, and its disregard for aesthetics and meaning ArtRank emblematically embodies the operational logic of a different art dispositif. As soon as collecting becomes purely a matter of calculation and calculus, the function of the collector itself can be automated. One might consider ArtRank a marginal phenomenon. But in replacing meaning and aesthetic quality with quantifiable data, aesthetic judgment and interpretation with statistics, algorithmic correlation, and calculation of risk, it indicates the contours of what would be a truly "inhuman" art dispositif.

21. Katya Kazakina, "Art Flippers Chase Fresh Stars as Murillo's Doodles Soar," *Bloomberg*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/print/2014-02-06/art-flippers-chase-fresh-stars-as-murillo-s-doodles-soar.html>. For Jacob Kassay's market trajectory, see: Sarah Douglas, "Through the Looking Glass: Behind Jacob Kassay's Meteoric Auction Rise," *Blouin Artinfo* (November 24), 2010, <http://de.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/278591/through-the-looking-glass-behind-jacob-kassays-meteoric>.

22. Ulf Wuggenig, "The Dealer as a Genius: The Creative Industries Approach and the History of the 19th Century Revolutionary Art," *Eipcp* (November 2006), <http://eipcp.net/policies/ccli/wuggenig/de>.