CYBORG ART AND THE RISE OF A SPECIFIC VOCABULARY: WHICH ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR CURATORS IN THE EXPRESSION OF A NEW POST-HUMAN IDENTITY?

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Abstract
"*In Cyborg Art, the artwork, the audience and the museum is all in the same body*". Which are the implications of that statement, cited in the official page of Cyborg Foundation, for curating? Through an extended literature review including multidisciplinary discourses, cyborg artists' interviews in various media, representative artworks and project examples, this paper focuses on the curating of cyborg art under the prism of language, philosophy, identity and research in the field. What does cyborgology mean for the post-human identity and how curators can express those ideas and represent the cyborg artists? It is crucial to stand in a few keywords that are part of a future language that does not concern only people with extended senses and bodies but future society in general. Among repeated words in almost any relative to cyborgology text are cybernetics, extension, hybrid, machine, artificial, device. How can curators of cyborg art explore the language at the service of art?

Keywords: *cyborg art, cyborg artists, cyborgology, curating, hybrid, language, post-human identity.*

Introduction

Millions of people worldwide have managed to restore lost body functions by adding prosthetic devices. Lately though, there is a rising, mainly artistic, movement that supports intentional self-enhance aiming to create, with the help of those devices, new senses or to enhance current senses. As Barfield and Williams (2017) state, the human body is becoming more and more mechanical and computational and thus less biological because of the use of prosthetic limbs, artificial heart pacers and defibrillators, implants creating brain–computer interfaces, cochlear implants, retinal prosthesis, magnets as implants, exoskeletons, and a host of other enhancement technologies. The writers explain that the body could be viewed now as a continuous information processing tool and people can be described as cyborgs, talking about a process that affects radically our perspective about human identity. Neil Harbisson, a Catalan-raised, British-born cyborg artist, transpecies activist and also an officially recognized cyborg by the British

government, points out, during his speech at TEDGlobal in 2012, that "*we should all think that knowledge comes from our senses, so if we extend our senses, we will consequently extend our knowledge*". According to the English Oxford dictionary the word "*cyborg*" is defined as:

"*a fictional or a hypothetical person whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements built into the body*"

A rethinking of the dictionary's definition renders questionable how stable the human normality is. Which instinct led to experimentation of the physical with the mechanical? What started as a fantasy cited in fiction and literature, has nowadays turned into tangible reality. Is this need a bridge to self-exploration, to self-expression of just a simple continuity of the humanity's history? Clark (2003) uses the term *"natural born cyborgs",* as a way to describe the level of our adaptability to technological innovations that shape our everyday life, pointing out how natural and smooth this transition was. It is crucial to understand though what Gillett (2006) underlines explaining that when the brain unites with advanced technology, external and implantable, then the prospect of cyborgs takes on ethical significance, raising questions about what is a person and how one should treat a partly artificial being. As we are discussing about a partly artificial brain, the interest is oriented directly to the centre of the creature's being. This is not just a purely philosophical concern but also an arising question about the future of human to human relationships. New theories on identity will lead inevitably to novel social structures and technological advancements while questioning what legal rights are implicated by technology that is being used to repair, upgrade, and enhance the human body and mind.

In an attempt to explore these challenges concerning humanity in the future, the present study is based on different references that describe the power and influence of cyborgology on society, language and also art. We have to accept we face a social change where we redefine the boundaries and the characteristics of human identity. A change that may have started from a small group of activists but it now has an impact in main domains of our social life as philosophy, law and human rights, science and language. Based on these thoughts, the main focus of the paper is how art and curating can integrate and familiarize the audience with those social and cultural changes.

Cyborgology and human identity in a technologised world

Studying and exploring cyborgology does not just satisfy our curiosity and concern about the future but it also aims to identify the implications and effects of this reality in many parts of society, such as law, human rights, science, language and artistic expression.

Historically, it was after the Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* that cyborgology has become a growth industry in the academic community. Haraway (2000) explains that *"a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most*

important political construction, a world-changing fiction". As it is now a reality and a unique field of anthropological studies, it develops its own language with sociological and political extensions. Haraway (1991) states as well, that "*cyborg ontology centres on what it is and what it means to be human in an increasingly 'technologised' world*". She added a political and feminist value on the issue, an idea that definitely intrigued the international scientific community. The Manifesto as a deeply political essay, enriches the relative research and studies how constructed identities regulate social relations. As Becker (2000) states, broadening Haraway's feminist view, "*new concepts of body and identity are explored, revealing fluid and open forms*". Beings like cyborgs and robots, multiple virtual bodies, avatars and agents, transhumanists and extropians are all over literature and it is almost impossible to perceive their differences as they claim their social, political and artistic position. Can cyborgs find their own -even sort of ironic- place in Darwin's theory of biological evolution?

Practically, it was in 2010 that Neil Harbisson and Moon Ribas, cyborg artists and activists, created the Cyborg Foundation, an international organization that aims to help humans become cyborgs. The foundation was created in response to the many letters and emails received from people interested in becoming cyborgs. The main objectives of the foundation are to widen the senses and human capabilities by creating and applying cybernetic extensions in the human body, to promote the use of cybernetics in cultural events and to defend the rights of cyborgs. Neil Harbisson, one of the founders of the foundation, is best known for having an antenna implanted in his skull and for being officially recognised as a cyborg by the British government. The antenna allows him to perceive visible and invisible colours such as infrareds and ultraviolets via sound waves. The antenna's internet connection allows him to receive colours from space as well as images, videos, music or phone calls directly into his head via external devices such as mobile phones or satellites. Harbisson achieved to integrate his extension/antenna in his image through the years. Interesting fact is that he had to battle with the UK Passport Authority, which at first opposed his aim of having a passport picture showing him with the antenna, but they finally accepted it. In this context, a new legislation was proposed in 2016 for protection of implants as part of someone's body. Following this case and as people are becoming more and more equipped with prosthetic devices, important issues of law and policy are raised which resulted in significant challenges for the established legal doctrine. In 2016, together with electronic civil rights and civil liberties, researcher and activist Rich MacKinnon proposed a list of Cyborg Civil Rights at SXSW conference-festival. The rights exposed the redefinition and defence of cyborg civil liberties and the sanctity of cyborg bodies. It also foresaw a battle for the ownership, licensing, and control of augmented, alternative, and synthetic anatomies; the communication, data and telemetry produced by them; and the very definition of what it means to be human (cyborgfoundation.com). Through the years, some major legal schemes legalized in different ways the concept of cognitive liberty and the use of prosthesis, both evolving areas of law for cyborgs.

Regarding the scientific perspective, since cyborg transition demands micro-chips and implants, the process includes a medical surgery. As Moon Ribas explained in her talk at Athens Digital Arts Festival in 2018 (2018.adaf.gr), there are many surgeons who are opposed to this kind of operations arguing that: it is not necessary, it is dangerous and it results to a completely different image of the person. These are also the exact same arguments that are usually posed before a sex reassignment surgery.

Another important field of everyday life that is highly affected by cyborgology is language. As expected, digital era has contributed many new words in our vocabulary and specifically cyborgology has its own vocabulary to be described. Micro-chips, implants, prosthetic limbs. Even the word cyborg is a neologism and it is untranslatable. As Pennycook (2016) underlines "*posthumanism in general, raises significant questions for applied linguistics in terms of our understandings of language, humans, objects, and agency*". Cyborg terminology is related with new words that describe the human condition.

It is also important to highlight the implications of cyborgology and its constant evolution from a philosophical perspective since it basically concerns the transition of human identity and as the main concept of Cyborg Foundation states : "*we would the first generation able to decide what organs and senses we want to have*". If cyborg community invites humans to redesign themselves, we should be prepared to redesign our perception about humans.

Research methodology

There are three main ways the cyborg concept is used within technoscience, cultural theory, literature, film and art:

Firstly, as a literal cyborg, referring to a human being having a prosthesis such as an artificial limb or organ; secondly, as a figural cyborg, which represents imaginative ways human bodies may actually be interfaced with technology; and thirdly, the metaphorical cyborg, which uses the concept of the cyborg – as a conjoining of separate ideas or entities – to allude to ethical, political and cultural aspects associated with organic and inorganic melding (Borst, 2009).

Curators should take under consideration the extents that the above concepts could have in art and artistic exhibitions/projects. The present study explores the main principles of cyborg art and the ways that it has been showcased until today. In this context, it examines a series of discourses and international literature works about cyborgology in order to get a wide insight of the arised issues and approach cyborg art from different, equally important aspects. From past interviews, artworks and projects to academic papers, it sets the context and examines the challenges for curators interested in the field.

Curating cyborg art: a review on various practices and approaches

Art stands besides every social transition. Cyborg art is an artistic movement where artists extend/enhance their senses beyond their physical boundaries by applying technology into their bodies. There is an immense change on how we perceive ourselves not only in definition with external aspects and/or devices that we may use everyday but in definition to ourselves and our inner possibilities. The artwork of a cyborg artist is the new sense, but it's an artwork that happens inside the artist. Cyborg Foundation claims that in Cyborg Art "*the artwork, the audience, and the museum is all in the same body*". This phrase could be extremely challenging for art curators and their attempts to find new ways of communicating cyborg art outside this small community to a broader audience.

Cyborg art occurs simultaneously entities and metaphors as well as living beings and narrative constructions (Hayles, 1999). Curating challenges involve different aspects of technoscience and cybernetics, identity constructions and definitely the constant evolution of humans and their practices. The cyborg being was predominantly explored within comic books, science fiction, sculpture and literature but these are only visionary works of a close future. Curating or expression of cyborg art so far has to present few approaches, that are mainly related with the artist himself/herself.

For example, Neil Harbisson uses mostly the power of a speech so that the audience could be familiarized with the idea and condition of being a cyborg. He is generally keeping in mind the goals of a speaker, he reasonably chooses to use a more simplified and comprehensible vocabulary. He attempts, through his simple descriptions, to help people understand what a cyborg is, to clarify the confusion with robots and technology and to make the image of a cyborg more tangible and approachable to general public. He is also transforming his experience into paintings, visualisations of famous songs.

On the other hand, Moon Ribas, co-founder of the Cyborg Foundation and best known for developing the Seismic Sense uses the performance as a tool of expression. She has implanted in her hand an online seismic sensor that allows her to perceive in real time earthquakes taking place anywhere in the planet through vibrations. In order to share her experience, she then translates her seismic sense on stage. Ribas transposes the earthquakes into either sound, in her piece Seismic Percussion; or dance, in Waiting For Earthquakes. In these performances the Earth is the composer and the choreographer; and Ribas, the interpreter. Performance is a common tool for cyborg artists like Manel Muñoz and Stelarc.

Finally, there are only a few examples of exhibitions or art projects focused on cyborg art. One of the most popular would be the exhibition Human+ (2015) in Barcelona, curated by Cathrine Kramer. The exhibition explores potential future trajectories of our species by considering both historical and emerging technologies, as well as their cultural and ethical contexts. It was a representative work in the field that mainly focused on the historical view of the evolution of cyborgs and cyborg art. It posed questions such as:

Should we enhance ourselves, or seek to modify our descendants? Are we

approaching a singularity of human-machine hybridization or de-skilling ourselves through our ever-increasing reliance on technological extensions of the body? Is extended human longevity a wonderful aspiration or a dire prospect for the planet?

As a premature example of curating cyborg art, it indicates the need for a more concrete curatorial proposal as cyborgology is evolving.

Discussion and implications for further research

Rethinking the idea of cyborgology, the main interest of this study is to underline that the cyborg movement is not just the dream of a group of activists but a new - or a not so novel anymore - reality for humanity. The parallelism with Darwin's theory of evolution may have sounded ironic but it could be as well ideal in order to describe the social changes that cyborg perspective brings upon.

On the other hand, surpassing the historical linearity as a curatorial approach regarding cyborg art, the interest of this proposal is focused on the connections among language, society and cyborg art. Language, as a very vibrant and vital part of society is demanded to be in constant change in order to facilitate the understanding of social structures. Curating is demanded to have the same effect with art. Curators take care of the artworks and build a bridge of communication between the art and the audience, facilitating the understanding of its meanings. Cyborgology drastically affects, as described above, language in many fields. The main suggestion of the present paper is the use of language and of this new terminology as a starting point in the creation of a new narrative of cyborg art. From a curatorial perspective, the interest is oriented in the exploration of how new terms and vocabulary could contribute in the better understanding of this new human identity. Cyborg art is in constant progress, so language should follow these constant changes. And since art is inside a cyborg's body what are the challenges for curation within the absence of an institution or within the absence of artworks? Could language based cyborg art curating lead to a new dictionary? A new grammar with new verbs and genres? It is crucial to stand in a few keywords as part of a future vocabulary that does not concern only people with extended senses and bodies but the future society as a whole. Among repeated words in almost any relative to cyborgology text are cybernetics, extension, hybrid, machine, artificial, device. Can a physical space turn into an imaginary dictionary? How can curators of cyborg art explore the language at the service of art?

Finally, as Becker (2000) notes "*the peculiar idea that in the near future human beings will be able to escape their fragile bodies and survive as pure minds in machines is only an extreme version of old fantasies that seek to overcome the unavailability of one's own body and the strangeness of others by simply ignoring them*". By all means in the end of this paper the concern is still the same: what is the substance of human identity? What comes in the future? How fluid are the limits that compose the human condition?

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