

1-1-1998

## The Body, Post Humans and Cyborgs: The Influence of Politics of Identity and Emerging Digital and Bio-Technologies

Geri Wittig

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch>

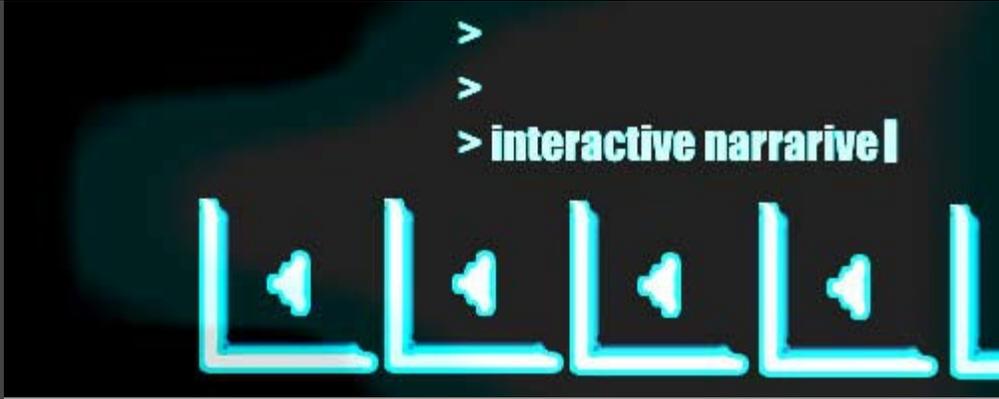
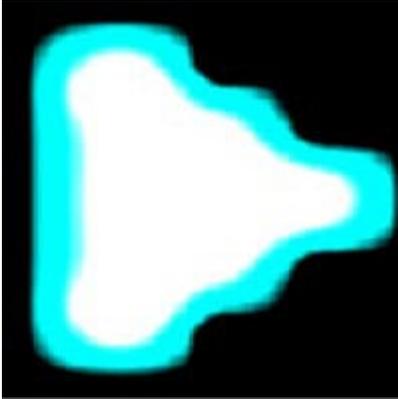
Archived from [http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch\\_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=168.html](http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=168.html). Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at <https://github.com/NickSzydowski/switch>.

---

### Recommended Citation

Wittig, Geri (1998) "The Body, Post Humans and Cyborgs: The Influence of Politics of Identity and Emerging Digital and Bio-Technologies," *SWITCH*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol5/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SWITCH by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).



## The Body, Post Humans and Cyborgs: The Influence of Politics of Identity and Emerging Digital and Bio-Technologies

Geri Wittig on Jan 1 1998

issue 05

**This article talks about the changing demographic and popularization of the internet and it's impact on the communication network.**

Since the advent of graphical browsers on the internet in 1993 and the subsequent explosion of the World Wide Web, the phenomenon of the internet has become increasingly visible in popular culture. It is not a truly popular medium, because although internet users, that is primarily web users, are becoming a far wider ranging demographic than the original government and academic internet user, it is still a rather limited group. However, it is a popular medium in that even if an individual has not actually been on the internet, with the proliferation of URL's popping up in advertising, publishing, and television, they are most likely aware of its existence and of the dialogue that surrounds its possible impact on society.

This changing demographic and popularization of the internet are having an impact on the nature of this communication network. New types of social interaction have been emerging on the internet and these developing social exchanges and structures are adding new layers to postmodern discourse. Enough time has passed for these phenomena to have been observed and analyzed by theorists in a variety of academic fields, including cultural studies, philosophy, media studies, sociology, art, etc., that the discourse around computer mediated communication is maturing and the literature related to computers in the cultural landscape is growing at a fast pace. The field of art and technology is increasingly moving into the sphere of activity that was largely dominated by photography during the 80's and early 90's, that is the arena in the artworld where postmodern discourse takes place.



Within the artworld of the '80s and the early '90s, a great deal of activity took place around the particular area of postmodern discourse known as the politics of identity.

The politics of identity, with its emphasis on the politics of gender, race, ethnicity, and subject position was a rich area of production for many artists. High profile artists, such as Barbara Kruger and Jeff Koons, whose work was informed by the politics of identity, brought this discourse to the forefront of the artworld.

There was a great deal of focus put on the body in identity politics during this time period and this attention directed at the body was reflected in the artworld. The body continues to be a focus in artwork that addresses identity, but the representation of, attitude towards, and questions about, the human body and identity are changing as emerging technologies in the areas of telecommunications and biotechnology effect the discourse of identity politics.

There is currently a great deal of activity in the field of the cultural studies of science and technology concerning issues of identity in terms of post humans and cyborgs. These issues are emerging in the artworld as evidenced in three prominent international exhibitions that have taken place in the past few years: Post Human, an exhibition which began at the FAE Musee d'Art Contemporain, in France in the spring of 1992, traveled to Italy and Greece, then ended at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg, in Hamburg, Germany in the spring of 1993; Documenta IX, in Kassel, Germany during the summer of 1992; and last year's Venice Biennale, Identity and Alterity. All three exhibitions, in their curatorial vision, contained some element of the impact of technology on human identity and raised questions about the post human condition.

The Post Human exhibition was primarily concerned with these issues. In his curatorial statement, Jeffrey Deitch states:

***Social and scientific trends are converging to shape a new conception of self, a new construction of what it means to be a human being.1***

Although the tone of the exhibition at times seemed somewhat sensational, the issues concerning advances in biotechnology, computer sciences and the accompanying changes in social behavior, that the exhibition draws attention to, are questions which are having an important impact on the politics of identity.

Jan Hoet, the curator of Documenta IX, reveals the anxiety that can be produced by the uncertainty of the impact of science and technology on human identity combined with an extreme postmodern theory that can be paralyzing in its relativity.

***At a time when experiences are becoming less and less concrete - more virtual, in fact - only total intersubjectivity, only the awareness of specific concreteness and physicality, can provide a new impetus . . . Reassembly of atomized experiences, reorganization beyond all scientific systems; reconstruction of an existential sensory network: this must be among the aims of art. The body must be talked about once more; not physically but emotionally; not superficially but mentally; not as an ideal but in all its vulnerability.2***

The Venice Biennale of 1995, points to questions of postmodern identity in its title, Identity and Alterity. The curator, Jean Clair, also draws attention to the uncertainty of this transitional time in society:

***If this retrospective was to have meaning then it should be exploited as an opportunity to assay the validity of the theories that have been propounded during the course of this century. The last decade has seen the collapse of all the ideologies and utopias upon which the last one hundred years have fed.3***

Sherry Turkle, professor of the sociology of science at MIT, speaks of this transitional period as a liminal moment:

**. . . a moment when things are betwixt and between, when old structures have broken down and new ones have not yet been created. Historically, these times of change are the times of greatest cultural creativity; everything is infused with new meanings.<sup>4</sup>**

The cyborg question is very complex as there is an incredible array of ways of categorizing cyborgs. There are many actual cyborgs among us in society. Anyone with an artificial organ, limb or supplement, such as a pacemaker, is a cyborg, but cyborg anthropology's concern is focused more on the social impact of human/machine integration and speaks more in terms of a cyborg society. Cyborg anthropology views the postmodern state as a mix of humans, eco-systems, machines and various complex softwares (from laws to the codes that control nuclear weapons) as one vast cybernetic organism.

Postmodern theory strongly informs the cultural studies of science and technology and the concept of the fluidity of identity and its manifestation in interactive narrative on the internet is a current topic of discourse. Sherry Turkle, who studied with Lacan in the late 60's, early 70's, describes in her most recent book, *Life on the Screen*, how theories that seemed right but abstract become clear in the context of computing. In computing, theories of constructing the self with language and the permeability of boundaries becomes manifest. Computing is made up of a set of languages. It is on the internet that the decentred nature of identity can be easily seen. Individuals who participate in interactive narrative on the internet can move through many selves while constructing a self and all this happens completely in text.

The artworld is now positioning itself to participate more fully in this discourse. Steps are taking place to bring the institutions and structures, that largely construct the high visibility artworld, further into the art and technology arena, particularly in the digital aspect. Institutions, such as SFMOMA and the Whitney in New York, have constructed web sites, some with project pages where interactive narrative art projects have the potential to take place. The high profile art magazines, where a great deal of art discourse takes place, are building their digital literacy. *Art Forum* has brought on R.U. Sirius, formerly of *Mondo 2000*, to write a bi-monthly column concerned with digital issues. In the April issue of *Flash Art*, "Aperto", *Flash Art's* new virtual exhibition, premiered with an exhibition called "Technofornia." These exhibitions which will highlight the art currently being shown in a particular city or region, exists as a cohesive exhibition only on the pages of *Flash Art* and its web site. As the artworld expands into the digital realm, the focus on remote humans embodied in real time digital systems will exist alongside the preoccupation with the body, as issues of organic vs. non-organic, post humans and cyborgs emerge to inform the politics of identity.

10/96

#### Footnotes

1. Jeffrey Deitch, *Post Human*, (Amsterdam: Idea Books, 1992), p. 27.
2. Roland Nachtigaller and Nicola von Velsen ed., *Documenta IX*, m (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992), p. 18.
3. *Identity and Alterity. Figures of the Body 1895-1995*, (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1995), forward.
4. Pamela McCorduck, "Sex, Lies and Avatars," *Wired*, April, 1996, p.109.

#### Bibliography

Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas. *Postmodern Theory: Critical*

*Interrogations*. New York: Guilford Publications, Inc., 1991.

Deitch, Jeffrey. *Post Human*. Amsterdam: Idea Books, 1992.

*Documenta IX*. Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992.

Hables Gray, Chris, ed. *The Cyborg Handbook*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

*la Biennale di Venezia 1995: Identity and Alterity*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1995.

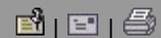
Lunenfeld, Peter. "Technofornia." *Flash Art*, March-April, 1996, p. 69-71.

McCorduck, Pamela. "Sex, Lies and Avatars." *Wired*, April, 1996, p. 106-110, 158-165.

Stone, Allucquere Rosanne. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995.

Stryker, Susan. "Sex and Death Among the Cyborgs." *Wired*, May, 1996, p.134-136.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.



## ::CrossReference

### **last 5 articles posted by Wittig**

**:: Interview with etoy - part 2** - Jan 20 2000

**:: Interview with etoy - part 1** - Jan 20 2000

**:: Situated and Distributed Knowledge Production in Network Space** - Jan 1 2000

**:: Interview: Game Girlz** - Jul 16 1999

**:: An Interview with Sandy Stone** - Apr 8 1999

**:: An Interview with Sandy Stone** - Apr 8 1999

**:: The Body, Post Humans and Cyborgs: The Influence of Politics of Identity and Emerging Digital and Bio-Technologies** - Jan 1 1998

**view all posts made by Wittig**