

Text
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We/You are almost there! This is what we often tell ourselves or others in order to encourage or remind them that once we reach “there”, we or our actions will enter into a state different from the current one. But this “there”, as a destination, does not only imply the temporal division between future and present, it also implies a spatial division - the difference between our current position and that of our destination. *Almost Human* is a response to and an analysis of the divisions between the existence of those that are human and those pseudo, quasi, and non-human: how these divisions manifest and are justified. Can we truly say that NASA astronauts in space, who are almost entirely dependent on inorganics to sustain their continued biological existence, still live human lives? And what of those on Earth who likewise depend on inorganics such as pacemakers and prosthetics to go about their daily existences? No matter the answer, the question we cannot escape is: how reliable is our current assessment of the division between organics and inorganics, and indeed is it possible to reconstruct this division that determines our aesthetic experience?

The artists of *Almost Human* –Linhan Yu, You Gu, Zhé Wang, responded to this question of division according to their differing individual aesthetics and personal experiences. But their responses do not correspond with “there” as a destination, as destination implies an end that unavoidably precludes the disclosure of the question. On the contrary, their responses explore what it fundamentally means to be human, and build upon this base by examining this question from the deeper perspective of mundane life.

To turn the normal into the unfamiliar is one of the goals of *Almost Human*. Through this, we are able to grasp the sense of and maybe reflect on the discipline imposed on us by society. The interesting part is, the artwork, using the body as an unfamiliar medium, makes a silent yet formidable rebuttal to the transhumanist aspects of early 20th century Russian Formalism. Here, our bodies, from the most mundane movements of our limbs, to our organs, to even the fundamental tissues formed by microscopic elements, all possess facets of the unfamiliar. Confronted with the unfamiliarity of our own bodies, we cannot help but ask: what has caused this disconnect within ourselves? The reflection brought about by this question inextricably points towards the societal disciplines imposed upon us. But when these disciplines mold our bodies, thoughts and even aesthetic experiences, are people even willing to consider possibilities that lie beyond the confines of the mold? This question affects the fascist living within everyone, the desire to control. To escape the control implies indeterminacy and danger, therefore, does the resistance and fear to the uncontrollable can constitute what human beings are?

The body as medium brings about artistic debate regarding technology: as technology exsomatisizes humanity, how do we come to grips with the divisions between human and non-human, organic and inorganic? The response to Heidegger’s definition of technology lies within an astronaut’s spherical eyeball - technology is that which allows humanity to immune to change. Astronaut eye protection can assist against the pressures of cranial fluid and allow effortless activity of the eyeball in a zero gravity environment with minimal side effects. The immunity brought upon by the melding of man and machine, the inevitable functionality of bodily organs in the face of a changing environment again raises the question of borders based on the concept of cyborgs: in the context of primitive man, where do we draw the lines between techno-reliant modern humanity, non-humans, and inorganics? Are we even able to draw these lines, or is it the premise, the dualistic assertion of man and machine that was wrong to begin with?

The artists’ questioning of these borders and divisions eventually lead to a reflection on fear. Does fear as an emotion create these boundaries between the human and non-human, organic and inorganic? For it would seem that man and animal have different methods of treating and reacting to fearful stimuli: while the animal would transform a fearful chemical stimulus into physical action, but man’s response is to suppress his fear, banish it into his subconscious where it cannot be externalized. This aside, humanity enjoys fear and relishes in its stimulus. In aesthetics,

philosophers' term those experiences that threatens survival and incite fear as sublime. From sensual experience, human aesthetic tends towards an active enjoyment of danger and self-destruction, yet this type of self-destructive aesthetic, in Burke's perspective, is inevitably of an ephemeral quality and unperceptible to the eye. This aestheticization of fear can be seen in the concept of the monument, for monuments bridge the gap between the past and the present, and act as manifestations of the unrepresentable. It is through this that monuments are able to suspend that fear of imminent danger, but this very act of suspension is what has agitated the questioning of the established system of divisions.

This art exhibition also takes from cognitive science's understanding of language to discuss intelligence versus emotion, consciousness versus instinct, human versus non-human, organic versus inorganic, and explores the divisions between each. Unlike humans, plants and animals are often said to exist outside of sapience, and inorganics moreso, outside of emotion even. Even neuroscience recognizes that the cognition system and sense perception are separate and independent from one another, fulfilling the paradigm of Descartes' mind body duality, and that only in the fewest of marginal cases are there exceptions to this norm that are espoused to be neurotypical by current empirical standards. Yet within this gap between mind and body there is also a tension, given form by countless failed merging of rationality and emotion. It is this tension that allows humans to escape the prison of rationalism and use their emotion and feelings to redefine themselves, like the Nietzschean Dionysus, and opening up the possibility of abandoning both halves of the duality to reinvent humanity's existence from a single concept of thing-ness.

Instead of a playful intellectuality, *Almost Human* exhibits a type of insane questioning, both introspectively and retrospectively. In the work, the artists continually attempt to rupture the divisions between human and non-human, organics and inorganics, like surgeons wielding scalpels with the intent of excising any and all suspicious elements, only this time, the artists wield the scalpels and they themselves are the subject of the excision. It is through this intimate skepticism of ourselves and the values and definitions that we hold that this work is able to bring about new, complex dimensions of aesthetic experience. Ultimately, through this work, we are finally able to ask ourselves the question: in the end, is the concept of humanity merely a name?