

Westworld: Western Allusions to Post-human in the Works of Taiwanese Women Digital Artists*

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Abstract

Post-human phenomena generally refer to interleaving issues concerning virtual reality, genome engineering, cyborgs, robots, artificial reproduction, etc. This paper intends to examine the booming creativity of Taiwanese women digital artists, including Cheng Shu-Lea, Chen Yin-Chu, Pey-Chwen Lin, and Yu-Chuan Tseng, and their works relating to the human body, spirit, and consciousness while implicating various dimensions of theory and design under the influence of gender consciousness.

Donna Haraway, in her discourse on digital feminism, indicates that the post-human cyborg is an entity surpassing and eliminating the dichotomy between gender definition and further deconstructs the cognition of gender/sex and therefore representing the body while reconstituting its significance. Post-human conceptualizations are manifested in multiple forms, including clones, transgender identities, and transformers in the popular culture as well as the modern art scene. Taiwanese digital artists, as Haraway proposes, reveal certain tension and uncertainty originating in the gap between human and non-human and empowering a phenomenon and imagination combining human body and technology—an uneased and unrestful status interleaving gender, human, and machine which reflects a unique point of view that comes from Taiwanese women artists.

Key words: post-human, Taiwanese women digital female artists, cyborg, gender and technology

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The term “post-human” first appeared almost half a century ago and has been a popular theme and motif in countless works. Clones, cyborgs, androids, and AI are now common to popular culture. In the past two decades, sci-fi and superhero movies have dominated the global movie market. The popularity of these movies had helped familiarize audiences with related issues. Ihab Hassan, in his “Prometheus as Performer Toward a Posthuman Culture?” predicted that technology would not only change the future medical sciences but dominate consumer culture.¹ It is of course obvious today—from main stream Hollywood films to literature, art, and Japanese animation—the post-human is part of mainstream culture now. No longer seen only in sci-fi movies, AI, androids and robots are used widely in various industries and consumer electronics. Yet for most people, the idea of “post-human,” still seems to be a notion rather distant from their lived experience; functioning cyborgs or letting AI taking over human labor is somewhat beyond people’s imagination.

Until today, the post-human condition is still to a certain degree limited to the museum despite the fact that post-humanism is perhaps the most all-inclusive critical movement/theory in a world where every critical movement is entitled with a prefix “post”—postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-industrialism, post-communism, post-feminism, post-structuralism, post-Marxism, etc. Humanistic concerns that have to do with “post-human” automatically include concerns for “the other” as well as entailing a certain “undecidability” when no one in this “post-everything” world knows exactly where we are going. Ironically, the closest experiences most people can have to actually realize that they are now in a post-human age would still be in a museum, especially in a highly post-modernized society of Taiwan where most people have access to the Internet and smartphones but media still would cover stories of legends and superstitions as news.

¹ 見 Hassan, Ihab. “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthuman Culture?” *Georgia Review*, 31, 1977, pp. 830-50.

Perhaps the taste of Taiwanese media reflects an interesting fact about this post-humanistic era that post-human condition with all its possibilities of creating transformations and mutations, is a resurrection of the era before science. Indeed, Taiwan is not lacking in mythical and folk narratives concerning the transformation of body and spirit. Taiwanese digital artists and their works, however, often reach out for inspiration from Western myth, legends, and folktales. Thus, the present study focuses especially on Taiwanese women digital artists and their works inspired by Western allusions in order to understand the post-humanist artist phenomenon and their concerns in Taiwan. This study will also look into the first organized post-human theme-centered exhibition in Taiwan, *Post-humanist Desire*. Curated by Ming Turner (2013-2014) in Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art, the exhibit responds to Donna Haraway's reflections on digital technology and the artificial intelligence of the early 90s.

In many cases, western classics, legends, and anecdotes inform Taiwanese women artists' motives. In rendering western classics into their works concerning post-human phenomena, Taiwanese female digital artists have revealed that post-humanism is still largely a western concept to the society of Taiwan. Taking a more recent exhibition as an example, Chen I-Chun's solo exhibit "Do You Dream of Electric Sheep? The N-time Destruction Starts Over Again" held in Liang Gallery, Taipei (2016) derived its title from Philip K. Dick's much beloved work "Do Android Dream of Electric Sheep?" which was adapted into Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*(1982).

Post-humanism and post-human phenomena appear largely as a Western influence and movement for Taiwanese women digital artists. Taiwanese artists' Post-human concept is reincarnated in multiple forms including clone, transgender, and transformers in the popular culture as well as the modern art scene. Taiwanese digital artists reveal certain tension and uncertainty originated in the gap between human and non-human and empowering a phenomenon and imagination combining the human body and technology—an uneasy and

unrestful status interleaving gender, human, and machine which reflects a unique point of view that comes from Taiwanese women artists.

Local colors and motives are rarely represented in their works. Major Taiwanese female digital artists such as Cheng Shu-Lea, Chen Yin-Chu, Pey-Chwen Lin, and Yu-Chuan Tseng often appeal to mythical allusions and images. Digital artwork can be seen across various exhibitions in museums. Under the maintenance of National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, the website www.digiarts.org.tw is organized to track artists' activities. The participation of women artists in the digital art scene is a positively recognized phenomenon in Taiwan, an island depending very much on its high-tech industry. Artists who use digital media as their creativity platforms often dwell upon issues concerning the transformation of human body and the very existence of consciousness.

Post-human Sin and Biblical Allusion.

One of the features of Taiwanese women artists' work concerning posthuman conditions is its reference to the Bible². Artists such as Lin Pei-chun and Liu Shih-Fen infuse their works with biblical allusions. Lin Pei-chun's famous Eve Clone series derives its title from the biblical figure Eve. Using wide projection screens and computer-processed images, Revelation of Eve Clone III presents the image of Eve Clone, a technological human species that has both authority and cloning ability, along with cautionary verses from the book of Revelation in the Bible transcribed in six languages to define and foreground this post-humanist Eve created through technology. The immersive space created through projection on a large curved surface, the religious songs playing in the background, and the interactive design give this immersive

² British artists Martin Rieser and Andrew Hugill collaborate on their work Secret Garden. The project is inspired by the different versions of the story of the Garden of Eden in various religions. Combining ballet dance, Rieser's poetry and visual design, and Hugill's music, the work is an interactive sound installation made with a number of tablets that could be seen as an opera in 3D augmented reality, representing poetic scenes of Adam and Even dancing and conversing in the Garden of Eden. These two artists reach back to the age-old story of human creation and trigger our imagination for a future Garden of Eden through the interactive art of virtual reality.

work a cult-like atmosphere.

Lin's *Revelation of Eve Clone II* is a series of photographs that creates a one-on-one, close-up way of looking, reading, understanding and interacting through a 2D medium. In this work, the image of Eve can be seen as "frozen and fixed" in the photographs, confined to a flat screen and limited space. Nonetheless, as viewers gaze at her images from different angles, they are activated again and can be viewed as "brought back to life" to reveal their inner desires.

Another work that incorporates biblical allusion is Liu Shih-Fen's "Garden of Mullerian." (2016). The application of the salt sculptures seemingly echoes the allegory of fallen people as lost sheep in the Bible. A group of goat skulls can be seen as a parable of man's diverse thinking and development. The use of salt invokes its biblical function to evoke the imperishable, and as the goat skulls are made of salt, the gesture thus becomes an attempt to immortalize all ephemeral lives in this world.

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Post-human Hybridity and Mythical Inspiration

Similarly, Western mythology also serves as a key inspiration for Taiwanese posthumanist artwork. Yu-Chuan Tseng's work "Chimera," for example, represents the many forms and transformations of post-human body as well as cyborg "deformity."

In Greek mythology, the Chimera is an enormous, fire-breathing creature with the head of a lion, the body of a she-goat, and the tail of a dragon. In terms of genetics and genetic medicine, the Chimera is a mosaic organism that combines cells from two or more different life forms. The artist uses this work to speak to the phenomenon of this digital age in which humans have already become chimeras of organisms and inorganic matter, thus many digital devices becoming integrated with the human body. Real and digital memories intertwine and transform into a hybrid device that evolves and reproduces. In this exhibition, the artist invites viewers to carry with them a portable device containing a symbolic “petri dish of a chimera” (made with an iPod Touch). As viewers walk through the exhibition room, any device that is removed from the matrix (a wireless recharging base), will cause the projection of chimeras on the wall to begin to grow, while the apparatus will begin to sing until it is replaced back on the recharging base. Once the device has been reconnected, the chimeras on the wall will become attached to the matrix, symbolizing the cycle of reproduction and rebirth.

A comparative example under the same title is American artist Saya Woolfalk’s installation, *Chimera*—a video performance with a series of objects installed on a wall. In the video, the artist has transformed a performer into a post-humanism hybrid of various species, and performs all kinds of gestures and poses in a colorful room to highlight the struggle of minds and material bondage in contemporary society. The installation on the wall consists of nine life-size figures in costumes tailored by Woolfalk. They are displayed with bilateral symmetry around the Chimera in the video, which symbolizes the power of blending, duplication and the differentiation of such post-humanist species. We can say that both Tseng and Woolfalk derive their inspiration from mythical Chimera³. The obvious combination of

³ Interestingly, American artist Victoria Vesna has a series of work inspired by Chinese zodiacs. *Hox Zodiac*, Taipei is a project inspired by the Homeobox genes, which are shared by humans and animals alike and which play an essential role in defining body regions. With the artists’ original and creative imagination and the possibilities opened up by science and technology, the project posits that modern scientists can manipulate genetic engineering to regrow limbs and transform the appearance of animals and humans. Through a game devised particularly for this installation, viewers can collectively create virtual spectacular creatures through the genetic engineering of the future.

different species seem to have inspired artists across cultures to reflect the posthuman condition of a hybrid body.

Post-human Body and Western Medicinal and Scientific Knowledge.

We can say that Liu Shih-Fen's installation work "Garden Of Mullerian Ducts—the Lost Ghost" aims at revealing the decisive point of a lifeform: from the neutrality of human embryos to the differentiations in male and female biology. Mullerian ducts can be detected on human embryos during the sixth week. Only in females do they develop into the reproductive organs. From the neutrality of human embryos to the distinctions in male and female biology, the development of these ducts therefore symbolizes the beginning of the world's differences, conflicts and contradictions.

"Garden of Mullerian Ducts – the Lost Ghost" takes viewers on a tour of two kinds of space and language. The artist Liu has made her illustrations into large digital prints and shows them on the walls in the center of the room, delineating the development of the Mullerian ducts as well as the biological characteristics of mandrakes and snails, which are androgynous. With her drawings, the artist looks into the origins of the sexes, both medically and socially, revealing that both sexes actually incorporate the qualities of the opposite sex. As for the space between the two walls of the installation, this contains a realistic full-body sculpture of the artist herself, dozens of salt sculptures of goat skulls, as well as images of androgynous animals and plants.

The images are placed between two mirrors, forming a space of endless reflections, constituting a metaphor in which two opposites incorporate each other yet reproduce by themselves. Further, there is a monkey's tail attached to the coccyx of the artist's sculpture. The tail serves as a supporting structure of "the thinker." The collage is simple and humorous, and seems to lead us to contemplate the origins of human life from both a creationist and an evolutionist point of view.

The mysterious developments of medical science and procedures has inspired other post-humanism works of art. Austrian artists Anna Munster and Michele Barker collaborate on a works titled “Struck” which incorporate research on neuroscience and explore the relationship between vision and movement in human perception. “Struck” questions whether medical imaging devices and the data collected from diagnostic equipment can really help patients to better understand their health conditions. The work seems to critically comment on the psychological distress imposed on physical pain caused by people’s blind faith in modern medical technology.

Modern medication has been regarded as the proof of advancement for western civilization. During its development, medical science has played a role in controlling the life and death of human beings and here provides a theme for works of art that force viewers to consider the mythical powers ascribed to this science.

Post-human Gender, Clone, and Reproduction

In addition to Lin, Liu, and Tseng, American-based Taiwan Artist Cheang Shulea’s work *Locker Baby Project* (2007) reflects a time when science is accused of careening out of control. Versions updated, bodies unwired, behaviours dictated, what remain to be programmed are memory and emotions. *The Locker Baby Project* is inspired by Japanese writer Ryu Murakami's novel *Coin Locker Babies* (1980) which tells a story of twin boys abandoned at birth in one square foot coin locker at Tokyo subway station. The boys grew up haunted with the sound of human heart beats, those of their birth mother’s. Largely the artwork seems to be inspired more by the modern technology and lifestyle. Coin lockers are symbols of Japan's train service, as well as modern mobility⁴. The historical association and references derived

⁴ In post-war japan, unwanted babies (often inter-racial) by unwed mothers were dropped off in coin-lockers. Fear of terrorists' explosive deposit, coin lockers have ceased to exist at public space in most metropolitan cities. In 1995, when Tokyo Doomsday was called for by cult Aum Shinrikyo, the coin lockers were sealed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Force for a day.

from coin lockers inspire Cheang's project.

The Locker Baby project proposes a fictional scenario set in the year 2030. The transnational DPT (Dolly Polly Transgency) advances clone babies as an industry. Genes extracted from deep sea pearls harvested off Okinawa Island are identified as best breed. Coin lockers situated in busy Tokyo train stations are located for underworld test tube fertilization. Ticking seconds to oblivion in darkness, the lockers announce the birth of the Clone Generation. Serving themselves in the "knowledge" industry, the locker babies are entrusted to negotiate human "memory" and "emotions". The Locker Baby can be seen as holding the key to unlock the networked inter-sphere of ME-motion (Memory-Emotion), a playfield of sonic imagery triggered only by human interaction.⁵

Eventually, post-humans may not even have a body. Taiwanese Artist Jia-Hua Zhan's SOMA Mapping II presents a synchro-digital image capture and computing system, the installation captures and reproduces the body images of people who interact with it, blends the images with other imagery, and shows them on a giant screen wall. Zhan's work may be appreciated from two perspectives: first of all, through the interactive installation, the users' behavior is recorded as a series of synchronized images and sounds, which are then reproduced through the programming of the installation and presented in a different way to show the mutual influences between human beings and the environment. Secondly, the work also becomes a continuous document which records the users' collective behavior as their images are saved in a public database. As the data accumulate, the project could be viewed as a collective project that will become an alternative manifestation of contemporary community culture. The work is, however, inspired by social network websites and services which conforms to the concept of six degree of separation. Again, it's western influence seems quite apparent.

⁵Huiling Hsia. 〈從「BABY LOVE」看鄭淑麗的網路裝置藝術〉。《鴿聲繪語》。2011年6月14日。網站。2017年5月16日。

Conclusion: Post-humanism as a Western Phenomenon

Many posthuman theme-based artworks in Taiwan seem to be inspired by western myth, biblical allusions and scientific knowledge. This may suggest that posthuman as a phenomenon is still regarded as originated the in West. While the posthuman condition is a global phenomenon, Taiwanese female artists' work shows several features that are distinctive to Taiwan's digital art scene. Often it distinguishes between embodiment/disembodiment, engages in controversial issues concerning body, gender, and spirit, alludes to mysticism, and draws inspiration from fields of science and medicine, to the point of lacking reference to local color and representation. Perhaps with the hybridity and the complexity of Taiwan's local culture, post-humanity is not a difficult notion or mood for Taiwanese to apprehend. It is tempting to speculate that more works that include allusions from various local cultures could set into relief a near totalizing Western sensibility that now seems to be taken for granted and therefore difficult to articulate or resist.