Sophia Woodruff

33661968

Thinking through the body

Vikki Chalklin

How have artists worked to subvert or challenge the idea of
Cartesian Dualism in their work?

3474 words including footnotes and bibliography

Throughout history, the artist's body has been a fundamental element of perceptions of their work, either in the work through self-representation, or enabling an access to the mechanisms of creative production, through the body being considered one that was likely to produce quality art (coded: white, male, European). As we have moved into an era of digital dependability and mediation, ideas of the body have become sidelined, vying for the anonymous transcendence the internet can allegedly procure for us as we all slowly upload (images of) ourselves to the cloud. In this era, it is extremely important to continue to engage with the historical precedence of such a situation – we built computers in the image of our brains, they didn't just fall into our laps.

'Cartesian dualism' refers to the foundational tenet of western philosophy fathered by Rene Descartes' pronouncement 'cogito, ergo sum'; 'I think, therefore I am'. This statement most directly implicates a division of the mind from the body, in which the mind is taken as the immaterial entity which makes up consciousness. In this formulation, the body becomes "simply an extended, non-thinking thing"[1], a machine consisting of various mechanical faculties, some of which aid cognition (such as "sense-perception, the common sense, the imagination, and the motive power"[2]) but are seen as supplementary to it. In contrast, Descartes asserts 'vis cognoscens' (the ability to know) to be indivisible and "purely spiritual"[3], reasserting Aristotle's claim that the universe consists of "2 basic kinds of substances…matter and non-matter"[4]. This conception of mental faculty existing in an immaterial plain, by necessity chained to a body which operates as "the essential enabling ground for human existence"[5], has been instrumental in shaping the development of media technology.

---

[1] Descartes quoted in Tarek R. Dika, "The Origins of Cartesian Dualism." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 6, no. 3, (2020): 344

[2] Ibid., 340

[3] Ibid., 336

[4] Khaldoun A. Sweis, "Existing without My Body: Technological and Spiritual Possibilities." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, (2013): 91

[5] Katherine N. Hayles, "Visualizing the Posthuman." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)*, vol. 59, no. 3, (2000): 51

From the way in which machines appeal to specific senses in isolation of the body, be that sight or

hearing, to the common comparisons of computer activity with human thought[6], it's impossible to

imagine a relationship to the digital not predicated on an assertion of the supremacy of the mind

over the body. The advent of the internet has strengthened these distinctions, creating a feedback

loop in which software continues ignoring the body's capacities (often promoting a dystopian goal of

bodily transcendence), thus making it increasingly difficult to perceive physical and mental capacities

as being held within the same undivided entity. However, despite this partial strengthening of the

differentiation, everything about our online identities continues to be rooted in our bodily ones: "in

digital Cartesianism, although the body is allegedly 'transcended' in virtual environments…it actually

functions as a necessary arbiter of meaning and final signifier of what is accepted as 'real' and

'true'"[7]. This is evident both in the way that bodies become a shorthand with which to form online

connection (such as in the common chat room opening 'ASL', which establishes users' 'age, sex, and

location'), and the more insidious establishments of internet communities based on reductive

divisions of race, gender, and in some cases, sexual activity[8]. As the Cartesian divide between mind

and body matures, consolidated by new data economies[9], an awareness of the pervasive

consequences of our objectification of our bodies seems move further and further away.

Of course, if digital bodily transcendence was ever conceivable[10], it would raise significant existential

questions for marginalised groups, whose "bod[ies] [have been] conceived [in postcolonial theory]

---

[6] For example, "conflation of [computer] memory and data is widespread and undergirds many of our own misconceptions about human thought processes" – Donna T. Tong, "Dis/Corporatization: The Biopolitics of Prosthetic Lives and Posthuman Trauma in Ghost in the Shell Films." *Imaginations (Edmonton, Alberta)*, vol. 10, no. 2, (2019): 122

[7] Megan Boler, "Hypes, Hopes and Actualities: New Digital Cartesianism and Bodies in Cyberspace." *New Media & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, (2007): 140

[8] Referring to 'involuntary celibates', the now-infamous internet community of mostly white men who blame women for their sexual frustrations and inability to act out their desires. Incel chat rooms have often become breeding grounds for horrific misogyny, being linked to multiple shootings and murders in North America.

[9] Based on mapping online behaviour and predicting psychological responses to stimuli, ranging from political campaigns to clothing advertisements.

[10] It's not: in his article in defence of the dualism, Sweis concluded that "we…automatically assume the body in all our conceptions of ourselves. If I imagine myself without my body…Can I imagine it without assuming I am

as a palimpsest on which relations of power are inscribed. In electronic media, the body is irrelevant to those relations"[11]. The racialised existentialism produced by an unbodied digital era has been explored in depth by the artist duo Mendi and Keith Obadike, whose prolific output repositions often overlooked and traumatic histories. In 2001, amidst an abundance of promises of digital utopianism brought on by the new millennium, Keith put his Blackness up for auction on eBay, titling the work 'Blackness for Sale'. The piece came from a desire to highlight the neo-colonial nature of online servers, "browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the eBay"[12], as well as challenge the existence of the 'Black Americana' section of the website that the piece was listed in, "which also includes just about every form of racist figurine and memorabilia imaginable"[13]. In putting an indivisible element of his physical being up for sale in this way, absurdly described in the faux-objective language of capitalism (the product is cited as able to 'be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably'), Obadike draws attention to the way in which black cultural capital has become a product in itself, away from the historic commodification of black bodies during the transatlantic slave trade. His intentional bodily presence in this sanitised virtual space draws attention to the subjugated conditions of the many other images of blackness that the website lists, and the lack of agency of those being represented. The digital nature of the piece is key to implicating the viewer, who is placed in a position of "activating the artwork"[14]; one has to reckon with the political implications of the page alone, and due to "blackness being something that lives in the realm of vision and because there was no photo on the auction page"[15], they must by necessity project their own expectations and desires

seeing?...Can we hear? How? I have no ears in a disembodied state" Khaldoun A. Sweis, "Existing without My Body: Technological and Spiritual Possibilities." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, (2013): 97
[11] Maria Fernandez, "Postcolonial Media Theory." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)*, vol. 58, no. 3, (1999): 63
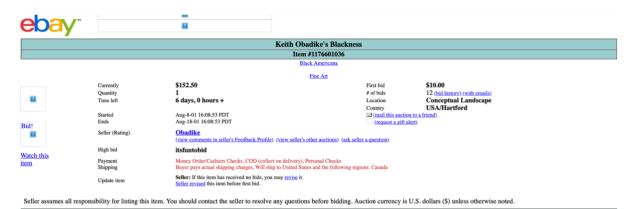[12] Coco Fusco, "All too Real: The Tale of an On-Line Black Sale. Coco Fusco Interviews Keith Townsend Obadike" *blacknetart.com*, (24-9-2001): blacknetart.com/coco.html
[13] Megan Driscoll, "Color Coded: Mendi + Keith Obadike's Black.Net.Art Actions and the Language of Computer Networks." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 47, no. 3, (2017): 59
[14] Ibid., 58
[15] Coco Fusco, "All too Real: The Tale of an On-Line Black Sale. Coco Fusco Interviews Keith Townsend Obadike" *blacknetart.com*, (24-9-2001): blacknetart.com/coco.html

onto what an experience of 'buying the product' would look and feel like. The power relation between the artist and the viewer in this digital encounter, in comparison to their live performances, is fundamentally different. One such performance is 'Numbers', a series in which Mendi and Keith, in assorted art spaces, read out numbers from various 'numerical databases of violence' (be it slave ship manifests or lynching records) whilst generating sound from the noise of their voices. The completely nameless, numerical nature of the data they chant echoes the digital disembodiment black people face: a space where blackness and the experiences of black bodies are obscured, and therefore stop being seen, but not existing. In this piece, the viewer is again left to construct their own meaning from what they're hearing, but bears physical witness to the process of re-embodiment, in which the artists, through their voices, bring the data back into African American bodies. The involvement of sound equipment heightens the abstract nature of the experience, reminding the viewer of the way in which this data has been othered by the institutions responsible for creating it, through giving an impression of listening through or into a machine. In this way, the artists effectively unite cerebral understandings of racist histories with their bodily agency to challenge Descartes' claims of disembodiment.
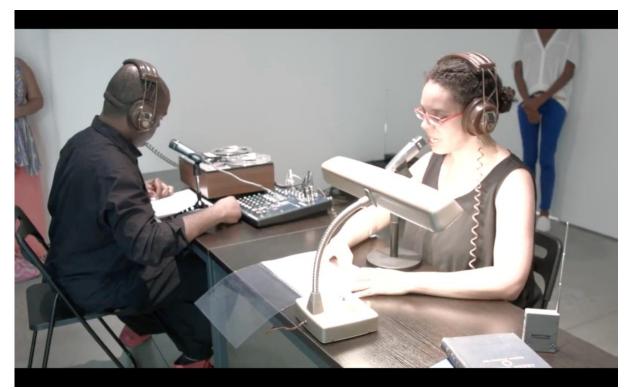

The archived listing of 'Blackness for Sale'.

Mendi and Keith performing 'Numbers' at Ryan Lee gallery, 2015.

The Cartesian proposition of bodily transcendence also brings up existential questions with regards to at what point someone can be considered human, in an era of exponential automation. Many of these anxieties are projected onto the figure of the Cyborg, first introduced by Donna Haraway as a mechanism to rethink feminist politics, seeing women as hybrid beings, subverting Descartes' distinction between human and machine[16]. Though theorists like Pierre Levy take the view that "Virtualization is not disembodiment but a recreation, a reincarnation"[17]; many people feel unease about the consequences of this new transferability, in which "humans are viewed primarily as patterns of information…embodiment is secondary; the organism has been replaced by its code"[18]. Numerous cyborg characters have been fictionalised to work through the implications of emergent technologies, notably Motoko Kusanagi, the protagonist of Mamoru Oshii's 1995 film 'Ghost in the

[16] "the machine is objective and runs according to programmed ends, whereas the human is organic and capable of spontaneous action" - Gavin Rae, "The Philosophical Roots of Donna Haraway's Cyborg Imagery: Descartes and Heidegger Through Latour, Derrida, and Agamben." *Human Studies*, vol. 37, no. 4, (2014): 510
[17] Maria Fernandez, "Postcolonial Media Theory." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)*, vol. 58, no. 3, (1999): 62
[18] Ibid., 62

Shell'. The film follows her grappling with the terms of her identity, as a cyborg inhabiting a mass-produced 'shell' (physical form), with an embedded 'cyber-brain' (susceptible to hacking), searching for a way to connect to her 'ghost' (human spirit, which at some points in the film seems to whisper to her). Motoko, through her semi-human brain capacity and desire for human vulnerability, relies on the inconsistent dualistic assertion that "if the body changes, gradually through technological advancements, it is not a human body anymore, and yet, the same numerical person or soul still exists"[19]. This strict regimentation of what makes a body human (as in, any physically technological element could be enough to class someone as a cyborg[20]), contradicts the way in which technology's impact on the brain continues to be ignored, irrespective of however many thought patterns get chemically reshaped by software designed for that explicit purpose. Motoko's body is clearly artificial; much is made of the danger that her diving habit poses to her, if the 'floaters' that hold up her body stop working, and yet she still retains many human-like features, from the muscles and tendons visible during her 'birth', to the blood that spurts out as her body rips apart like flesh during her battle with the tank. In this way, though cyborg narratives are often perceived as a way of exploring posthuman bodily potential, it is also true that Motoko's illustrators still chose to give her a body strongly reminiscent of a female human. Whilst this could be read as merely a mechanism with which to further objectify female bodies and project sexism[21], it is also true that if we were able to recognise an immaterial consciousness as an entity within itself, cyborgs wouldn't need to have anything reminiscent of a human body for us to have a conception of them as total, self-contained being. This idea is explicitly highlighted through the antagonism set up between the characters of

---

[19] Khaldoun A. Sweis, "Existing without My Body: Technological and Spiritual Possibilities." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, (2013): 90

[20] For example the case of Neil Harbisson, referred to as 'the world's first cyborg activist' after implanting a brain sensor that enabled him to convert colour into sound (to counter his achromatopsia, a rare form of colour blindness)

[21] A common criticism of 'Ghost in the Shell' is Matoko's "gratuitous nudity which is only superficially excused by the…optical camouflage embedded in her skin" – Donna T. Tong, "Dis/Corporatization: The Biopolitics of Prosthetic Lives and Posthuman Trauma in Ghost in the Shell Films." *Imaginations (Edmonton, Alberta)*, vol. 10, no. 2, (2019): 133

Motoko and the Puppet Master. Whilst Motoko tries to destroy her body to protest her servitude[22],

the Puppet Master, an AI program created by Section 6, downloads himself into the same mass-

produced cyborg shell to request political amnesty, declaring himself a 'sentient being' now that he

has gained embodiment. At the denouement of the film, when the Puppet Master convinces Matoko

to merge consciousnesses so that they can both be reborn instead of doomed to creating copies of

themselves, Section 6 destroys both cyborg bodies. Matoko's colleague Batou is able to protect her

brain shell, and implants the new merged consciousness into a black market cyborg body, that of a

child. The consistent necessity of artificial sentience to have a physical 'shell' to act through in this

film strongly challenges Descartes' idea of the functions of the divided self, whilst simultaneously

creating a narrative in which "cyborgization is imagined both as allowing humans to surpass their
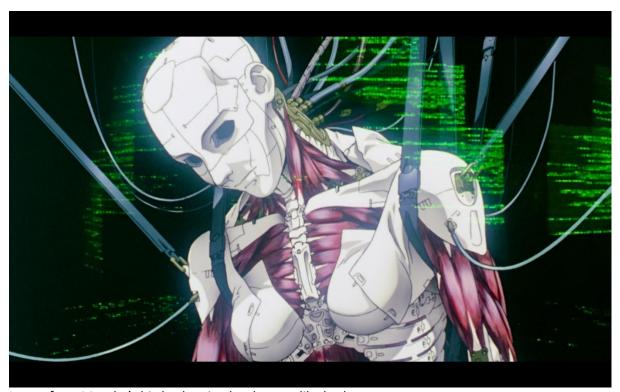
original biological limits and as dehumanizing"[23].

Image from Matoko's birth, showing her human-like body.

---

[22] However empowered Matoko may be by her technological capacities she is still a technological object in possession of the state, who have the rights to her body and cyber-brain if she would ever choose to defect from Section 9.

[23] Donna T. Tong, "Dis/Corporatization: The Biopolitics of Prosthetic Lives and Posthuman Trauma in Ghost in the Shell Films." *Imaginations (Edmonton, Alberta)*, vol. 10, no. 2, (2019): 132

Matoko meditating on the conditions of her existence.

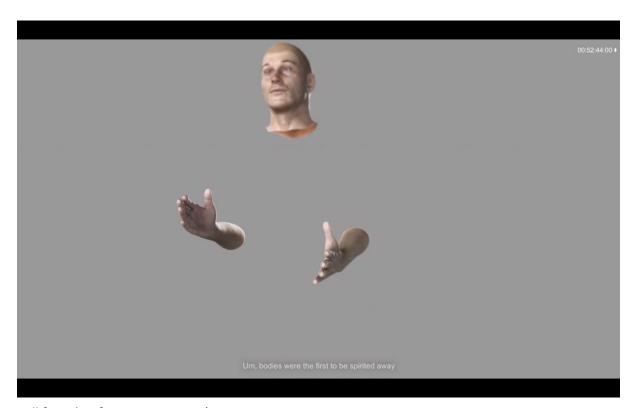The merging of Matoko and the Puppet Master.

In a more traditionally artistic way, through literal representations of the human figure, Ed Atkins directly engages many of the existential questions posed by the division between mind and body. His digitally animated figures actively deny their subjectivity, speaking in garbled language, sometimes bodiless, abstracted through the strangeness of their conduct from the situations in which they find themselves (be that having a drink at the pub, or on the phone to a parent). He often highlights the importance of death in his work, stating that the figures are 'born dead', imperative for recentring his viewers in their own bodies: "you could be returned through the sheer deadliness of this thing that would remind you that you weren't dead"[24]. In some ways, this claim for the figure's universalism could be seen as upholding the trope of white male bodies as default, as literally every Ed Atkins video is of a white man. It would be difficult to imagine people of multiple ethnicities or genders watching the inability of the figures to respond as a living person would, and instantly connecting it to their own subjective experiences of life. This disconnect is further established by the often extremely abstract audio content. In his 2014 video 'Ribbons', the face mutters out streams of unclear feelings between shots of the pub, at one point proclaiming 'so try talking on a blog with your fucking arms cut off x'. In a world in which some people do have their arms cut off, or live with disabilities that mean they don't have the ability to move them, this sort of proclamation coming from the angst of an ironic able-bodied white man feels tone deaf; the work, with its depictions of paralysis, would certainly feel more prescient if produced by someone who had lived through those (or at least similar) experiences. However, perhaps Atkins is stuck in the trap outlined by Maria Fernandez, in which "to admit that inequalities exist in cyberspace is for some tantamount to *authorizing* inequality"[25]; unable to look past his own subjectivity, Atkins has too much invested in the conceptual artistic possibilities of disembodiment to acknowledge that its very concept ignores the experiences of a huge amount of people. His piece 'performance capture' gave viewers the chance to become a disembodied white man for themselves, through the positioning of an open mic
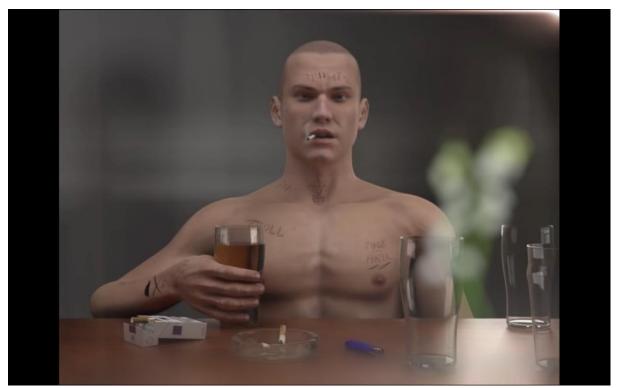
[24] Francesca Gavin, "Ed Atkins on bodily fluids and death" *dazeddigital.com*, (6-1-2014), www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/18084/1/ed-atkins
[25] Maria Fernandez, "Postcolonial Media Theory." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)*, vol. 58, no. 3, (1999): 63

in the space. The microphone was connected to software that mapped their words and expressions onto the figure, made up of a floating head and arms that were in correct spatial relation to each other, but doing impossible movements. The resultant video is humorous yet extremely confusing, as the head meditates in slurred words (intoxication was encouraged at the exhibit) over the state of bodily positioning in society. Atkins' intention is never to supersede the body, focusing on the idea that our bodies are to some extent something we're trapped in (through his frequent use of 'uncomfortable' bodily sounds such as farts and burps). Though his investigations are often humorous and very visually compelling, and illicit strong reactions of claustrophobia and discomfort, it seems that whiteness is an unspoken rule of engagement with the work. This makes it difficult to see it in any tradition except that of the typical detached European philosopher.

Still from 'performance capture'.

Still from 'Ribbons'.

Even as this essay has endeavoured to highlight the ways in which artists have asserted or explored

bodily experience in increasingly virtual contexts, because of the dualism's framework of opposition

it has been very difficult to point to a true subversion of it[26] in terms in which the mind and body are

united, more akin to Hegel's idea of spirit. I have done my best to draw out situations which point to

potential reconciliations between the mental and physical: from conceptions of our existence as

defined by virtual possibilities, to the assertion of marginalised experiences of disembodied

technologies. However, I can't see this essay as something that my body produced, though my hands

played an important role – the dualism is too deeply ingrained. The artists that I researched helped

me to understand the role that the search engines I used to research them play in this distancing,

---

[26] In the words of Mirt Komel: "the main error of all the philosophies that try to refute Cartesian dualism is either way basically the same: by reduction or transposition they still reproduce the basic conceptual distinction" – Mirt Komel, "THE GHOST OUTSIDE ITS SHELL: REVISITING THE PHILOSOPHY OF GHOST IN THE SHELL." *Teorija in Praksa*, vol. 53, no. 4, (2016): 924

and become more aware of how alienated I am, which I hope to be a first step towards dissolving

these ideas in myself. I still sit in my body behind this screen, typing, looking out.

Bibliography

Boler, Megan. "Hypes, Hopes and Actualities: New Digital Cartesianism and Bodies in Cyberspace." *New Media & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2007, pp. 139–168.

Dika, Tarek R. "The Origins of Cartesian Dualism." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2020, pp. 335–352.

Driscoll, Megan. "Color Coded: Mendi + Keith Obadike's Black.Net.Art Actions and the Language of Computer Networks." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2017, pp. 56–67.

Fernandez, Maria. "Postcolonial Media Theory." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1999, p. 58.

Fusco, Coco. "All too Real: The Tale of an On-Line Black Sale. Coco Fusco Interviews Keith Townsend Obadike" *www.blacknetart.com,* 24-9-2001, blacknetart.com/coco.html

Gavin, Francesca. "Ed Atkins on bodily fluids and death" *www.dazeddigital.com*, 6-1-2014, www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/18084/1/ed-atkins

Hayles, N. Katherine. "Visualizing the Posthuman." *Art Journal (New York. 1960)*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2000, pp. 50–54.

Komel, Mirt. "THE GHOST OUTSIDE ITS SHELL: REVISITING THE PHILOSOPHY OF GHOST IN THE SHELL." *Teorija in Praksa*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2016, p. 920.

Rae, Gavin. "The Philosophical Roots of Donna Haraway's Cyborg Imagery: Descartes and Heidegger Through Latour, Derrida, and Agamben." *Human Studies*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2014, pp. 505–528.

Sweis, Khaldoun A. "Existing without My Body: Technological and Spiritual Possibilities." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, 2013, p. 89.

Tong, Donna T. "Dis/Corporatization: The Biopolitics of Prosthetic Lives and Posthuman Trauma in Ghost in the Shell Films." *Imaginations (Edmonton, Alberta)*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, pp. 119–152.