

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 24
Lec 24 : Posthuman Performance Arts

Hello everybody. This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad, and here we continue our exploration of posthumanism in other domains. We've already looked at bio-art in the previous module, and there we noted the fact that the mixture of biological material, which might be deemed natural, with technology, which we might call cultural, is often used as a way of provoking thinking about, say, environmental pollution, questions of identity, questions of ethics, and questions of origin and evolution. Through various examples, we have seen how post-humanist influence is very visible, very tangible, in the way these artworks demolish the barricade, the barrier between nature and culture, and draw attention to the fact that we, as humans,

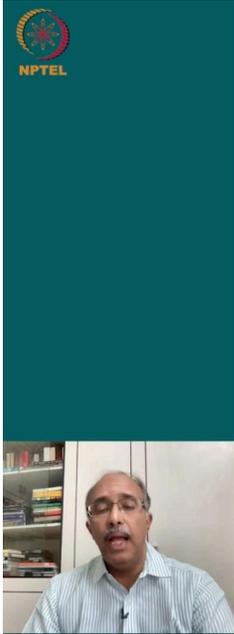
have always co-evolved with technology and that biological matter has been commodified, rendered into consumer products, and been the source of identity politics biopolitics, as it has been called. It has also been the source of emancipatory potential. So we should not think of bio-art as just another maverick, eccentric way of thinking about artistic materials. Yes, it is the use of biological matter as artistic material, as a substrate on which art is produced, but that's not the only purpose for which biological matter is utilized.

Bio-art is a method, a process, a domain in which very serious ethical, technological questions and philosophical concerns are addressed. And we looked at some of these. Particularly in the last example we took of sentinel species, where an artist, Cicely Mary Tone, injected microplastics into her own blood and monitored how her blood and its macrophages responded to them. The point that Cicely Mary Tone and her collaborators who are from medicine and the biological sciences were making was that we always think of other species as sentinel species.

But what about humans themselves? Are we not sentinel species? Can we not be sentinel species? What stops us from being sentinel species? So the point is to ask ethical and moral questions also about the way in which humans have utilized biological matter.

In today's module, we will look at post-human performance arts. And one of the artists that I want to pay some attention to, whom I have already mentioned before, is Stelarc. I mentioned in passing about him attaching an extra ear and adding an extra arm with which he wrote the word 'evolution.' He wrote it with all three hands. There is a website which you might want to visit for Stelarc.

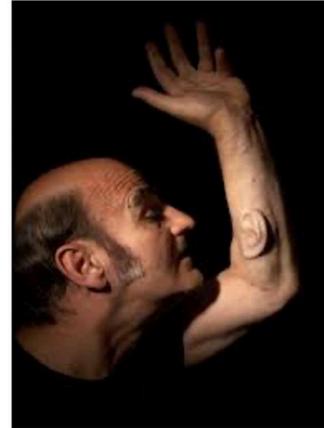
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Among the earliest practitioners of art that adopted a posthumanist and transhumanist stance was Stelarc.

<http://stelarc.org/> .php

He added an extra ear
He added an extra arm (he wrote a word with all three hands: 'evolution')



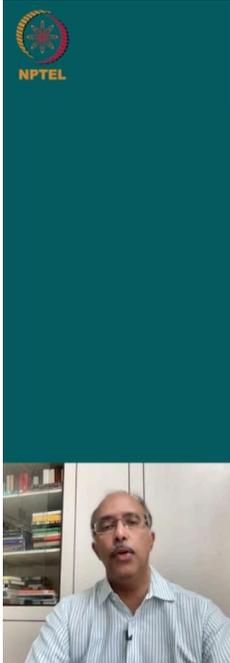
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It may or may not be something everybody wants to watch. Some of you might find it a little boring, too visceral, too much based on the corporeal grossness of our bodies. He has several projects, most of which have been seen as pioneering and provoking very deep, very serious questions about what humans are, what biological matter is. Anyway, you might want to take a look at Stelarc's performance pieces.

Post-human performance arts focus on the rise of what has been called composite bodies. Composite bodies are a mixture of the human and the non-human. And the mixture of the human and the non-human produces a third body. A third type of body. One which has different capacities of form and function.

Why is this important? You will remember we have already spoken about Kremaster, Matthew Barney's Cremaster. We have spoken about art which is clearly meant to be a mixture of biological matter and technology. And of course the fact, the myth, the possibility of chimeras, of the mixture of genetic lines, becoming a possible future of human evolution.

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Posthuman performance arts focus on the rise of 'composite bodies': of the human and the nonhuman (Stalpaert et al).

The bonding of human and nonhuman produces a third, composite, body, one with new capacities of form and function.

Posthuman performance gives more space and importance to things (not necessarily things treated as 'objects' (humans bestow things with value and use, thereby making them objects)

Where in traditional performance the movement belongs to humans and where objects are just props. In posthuman performance, this prop-function is modified so that agency, action, movement do not necessarily proceed only from humans.

Posthuman performance calls into question the anthropocentric views of space, objects and agency by introducing the nonhuman element: (machines, plants, animals, other objects) to demonstrate connections and alignments, co-becoming of the human with nonhuman others.

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So, Stelarc and post-human art, when they talk about composite bodies, are gesturing precisely at that. So, the composite body is one which is endowed with new capacities of form and function. Post-human performance gives more space and importance to things. To things, right? Not necessarily things as objects, because objects have value, and humans bestow that value, but just things.

Now, whereas in traditional performance, the movement is that of the human, and the objects just stay in the background as what are called props, but in post-human performance, the prop is itself modified. So that props possess agency; they can enact action, and they can enact movement. Which is to say that movement and agency are not the province, the prerogative, and the privilege of humans alone. That the possibility of agency, the possibility of movement, is also available to things, to objects, to what were dismissed as just props in a performance piece.

So much post-human art questions the border, the boundary between human and non-human. Because for a very long time, we have assumed that agency, action, and movement are solely human traits. Post-human performance calls into question the anthropocentric idea of space, that humans evolved within space. Space exists to serve humans.

What post-human performance does is introduce the non-human into this space. It could be machines, it could be plants, it could be animals, or it could be just non-living things. And to show that, humans co-become with them. That we construct our space through a specific interconnection with other objects.

Those objects can be living or nonliving. Organic, inorganic, animate or inanimate. Note what posthumanism has always taught us, that humans have co-evolved with technology,

humans have co-evolved with other species. If you put these two together, you have post-human performance as foundational premises. Right?

So, post-human performance calls into question the anthropocentric views of space. It questions how humans have built space around us. They have attributed agency only to certain things, living objects. And as we know, and as we have discussed in our approaches to post-humanism, in which we looked at vegetal life, critical plant studies, we documented and discussed the fact that plants have a certain kind of agency too. That it's not just animal bodies and human bodies that have agency, but plant bodies also have agency.

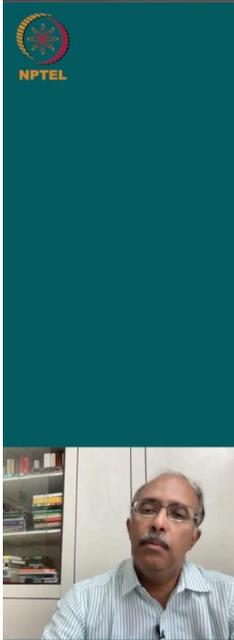
By agency we mean, philosophically or in terms of critical theory, we mean the ability of To pursue a specific program of action. Which the creature or the organism has decided upon. So suppose for instance. I wish to speak to you.

I possess the agency to speak to you. I can speak because I have a specific biological apparatus that generates sounds. I have a technological device, a laptop and a speaking machine, which is attached to it, built into it, that will then record what I say. You, as in my audience here, have devices in front of which you sit and through which this voice that I am enunciating my arguments will reach you.

So we assume that agency is human, and we assume that agency belongs to living things such as animals and humans, but not to plants. So what about non-living things? So we have generally dismissed non-living things as possessing any kind of agency. And this, under the influence of philosophers like Rossi, Braidotti, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and others, has been revisited.

These are philosophers who argue that the non-living, the inanimate, also possess some kind of agency, which we need to account for. Laurent Lefebvre's Living Machine is a famous post-human performance art piece. It's a theater box, but it's also a human residence. And what happens in the Living Machine? The humans perform life itself.

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Laurent Liefoghe,
Living Machine
https://we-make-money-not-art.com/performing_space_ex-tends_the/



Living Machine is both a theatre box and a fully-equipped home. Here humans perform living.

But, whether its inhabitant lives there or not, the house goes on living its own life, opening up the blinds, making coffee and switching on the light in the kitchen when the morning has come, going completely silent, shut and dark in the evening, etc.

According to the time of the day, the walls become transparent, opaque or reflective.

When a spectator moves inside and outside of the box, s/he sees himself, looking at others who become performers in a scene, or becoming a player to others, etc.

Thus, the house and its objects have a life of their own.

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They perform living there. Inside this box. There's a website which you might want to take a look at, where this performance piece has been presented. The question is whether the inhabitant, whether the resident lives there or not, the house goes on living its own life because it's automated. Curtains go up.

The coffee machine turns on. The light turns on or off as it becomes dark. Walls become transparent; you let in the sunlight or keep it out. When you move into the box, you see yourself, and others become performers watching you. So objects in the house and the house itself have a certain life of their own.

When you enter the box, when you enter the house, you become part of that particular structure, that particular performance. And the people who are outside watch you and oh, what is so unsettling? Oh, the confirmation is on. The walls have become opaque because the sunlight outside is too bright. The air conditioning has turned on.

The sound system, the music system, has come on. And who's this? Oh, that's a human performing in that particular space. So, does the human perform the space, or does the space perform itself? Or, to put it in a slightly different fashion, where does the human's performance stop and the performance of the space begin?

You can answer that question. Because the artwork is meant to say that the space undertakes its own performances. It undertakes its own agential acts. Remember what we said. Agency is the ability to carry out a set of actions which you have decided to enact.

So the house and its objects have a life of their own. Then there is Lauren Lefugue again with Sanja Mitrovic in Daydream House. It's the same house from the previous art installation, that is, *Living Machine*, which is reused in *Daydream House*. And here, that house has been put up inside a museum. And this becomes a problem because, you see, a house is not a museum, right?

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Sanja Mitrović and Laurent Liefoghe, *Daydream House*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9HQoLLAIdQ>

The house from *Living Machine* is reused in *Daydream House*. The 'real' house is now set up in a museum space. So, the functional house is between a house and a museum. Everyday life is a performance for spectators.

Space becomes saturated with a presence that—in its absence—reveals autonomous activities and modes of being when things are left alone.
André Lepecki

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There's a YouTube video of this art object, of this performance piece called Daydream House, which you might want to take a look at. The idea is that when the house moves into a museum, is the house a house, or is it part of a museum performance? When the house is moved into a museum, does the museum absorb the house, or does it retain its distinctive qualities? Does the everyday performance inside that house become a museum piece, or is it just everyday life?

Remember the YouTube slogan? Broadcast yourself. Right? Now the question is, when and how do you believe in your life, your everyday life? I had just had my second cup of coffee, or I missed the bus going to work, or my car had a flat tire. Why do we put this out on Insta?

Why do we tweet it? Why do we put it up on YouTube? Why do we blog about it? It is what I'll elsewhere refer to as the museumization of the everyday. In an early book not recently where we transform our everyday lives into artistic performances to be telecast, to be documented, to be shared.

Honestly, ask yourself, Who is interested in knowing that I had a flat tire on the way to work? After drinking coffee, my throat doesn't feel very good. I mean, are these extraordinary experiences that have to be documented? Is it in everybody's interest to know that you spilled your coffee or that your cat is unwell?

But we broadcast ourselves. We document it. This is the museumization of the everyday. Or the museumization of the quotidian. The everyday.

The ordinariness of our lives. It's not like you conquered Everest. You did something extraordinary. You have transformed the ordinary into a spectacle. You have transformed the routine, mundane acts of everyday life into a spectacle.

That's the point. That's precisely the point. So in performance arts like Mitrovich and Lee Fugg's Daydream House, the distinction between the house and the museum breaks down. Let's approach this from another angle. What is your house doing when you're not in it?

You've gone off to college. To your job, or uh, you just stepped out of the house. What is the house up to now? I'm not asking a question about horror films. In horror films, you know what the house is up to, right? Ghosts come out. All sorts of creatures are there, but mostly the creatures come only when there are humans because what's the point in haunting an empty house? Uh, but we know that the house is there. What is the house doing in your absence? That's the question. Does the house have agency of its own? Does the house have abilities of its own?

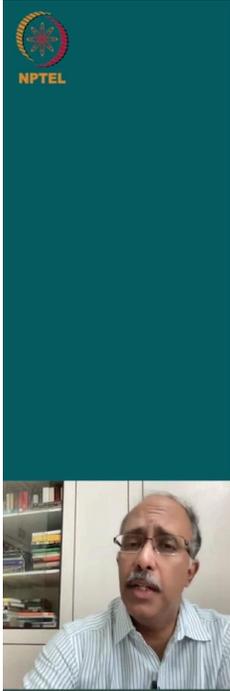
Does the house daydream? For those of you who are interested in slightly offbeat questions, I would recommend a novel. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. Some of you may know the text, but it's worth taking a look at again.

Because its opening scene, opening paragraph, is a very powerful example of a house which is an inanimate, inorganic, non-living object seeming to have a life of its own. You don't meet ghosts there. It's not that kind of horror story where things jump out of the cupboards or there's some bizarre creature with fifteen rows of teeth out to get you. No, it's not like that. As Jackson would say, whatever walked there, walked alone.

What occupies Hill House? We don't know. But the larger question is precisely this. Does an inanimate object have anything like agency? So, moving on to another example.

Maximilian Haas and David Weber Krebs Balthasar. Again, there is a website for you to take a look at. Balthasar is the fictional name of the protagonist, who is actually a donkey. The donkey is put on stage with a group of human performers, and the performance is the humans trying to engage with the donkey. The donkey is the center of the action, so to speak.

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Maximilian Haas and David Weber-Krebs, *Balthazar*

<http://www.davidweberkrebs.org/work/balthazar-2/>



Balthazar is the fictional name of the protagonist, a donkey. The animal is put in with a group of human performers who seek to engage him or her in theatrical action. The donkey is at the centre of the action.

The animal moves freely through the space of the stage and the people act formalized in a group.

At one point, they played music and *Balthazar* seemed to be listening

Wordlessly, they decide upon the direction and rhythm of the walks they draw diagonally through the entire space. The donkey follows or may just stand still.

The people then return to him with a few turns, stand up in front of him and start over.

We assume that intentionality of movement is only that of the humans. Balthazar is about interspecies performance, complicating the orientation of humans and others in space.

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And what does the donkey do? The donkey moves here and there. The donkey is not chained or kept in a cage. The donkey is just put on the stage.

The donkey does whatever its mind asks it to do. It wanders here and there. And the humans on stage are trying to engage with it. The humans have a plan of action, presumably, on how to talk to a donkey, how to address a donkey. Whether the donkey has one or not, well, that's the point of the performance, isn't it?

Then they begin to play music, and *Balthazar* seems to be listening. They try to walk here and there. They walk diagonally and straight. They stand in front of him, and the donkey moves away. Sometimes the donkey follows one of them, then it stops walking here and there.

So we have always assumed that the intentionality of movement that we move with a purpose belongs only to humans. But *Balthazar* is about interspecies performance. Remember, humans co-evolve with technology, but we also co-evolve with other creatures, including plants. And *Balthazar* is a performance that is interspecies, asking us to pay attention to how we interact with other species. I now want to move on to something different.

And this is an artwork called *Rare Urban Wear* by a group called *Unknown Fields Division*. This is a series of photographs, films, and artifacts with the title *Summer 2014, A World Adrift*. And it's from a tour into a very difficult place to reach. China's rare earth mining area in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the northern part of China. Rare earth metals are essential components of practically all high-tech electronic items.

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Unknown Fields Division, *Rare Earthenware*

A series of photographs, films and artefacts with the title *Summer 2014_A World Adrift (Part 02)* from a tour into China's rare earth mining sites (Baotou, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the north of China)

<https://www.tobysmith.com/project/rare-earthenware-2/#:~:text=Rare%20Earthenware%20-%20Extended%20Essay&text=The%20film%20documents%20their%20voyage,tailings%20from%20the%20refining%20process.>

Rare earth metals are essential components in high-end electronics and are used for the production of magnets, camera lenses and batteries.

They are among the world's most sought-after materials.

The production of one tonne of rare-earth metals leaves behind more than eight-kilogramme fluorine, 75 cubic metres of toxic wastewater, and approximately one tonne of slightly radioactive mud.



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As a result, they are among the world's most expensive and difficult materials to obtain. There are statistics that I have put up on the slide. The production of one ton of rare earth metals is a long, tedious process, leaving behind more than 8 kg of fluoride, 75 cubic meters of toxic wastewater, and one ton of radioactive mud. Unknown Fields Division smuggled its members into the mining area and took pictures of the mining process and its remnants, commonly called tailings. From this toxic mud, they took some samples into their bags and brought them back.

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The team members sneaked into the mining area, illegally, and secretly snapped off pictures of the mines, the tailing and the labs. They smuggled out mud from the tailings

From this toxic mud, they made three vases of three different sizes.

Each vase represents precisely the amount of radioactive mud produced as a by-product of the manufacturing process for a smartphone, a laptop and the batteries used in an electric car, respectively.

Rare Earthenware draws attention to materiality and capitalism, global industry and the earth.

It 'displays the entanglement of the history of these artefacts with socio-economic relations, the dictates of the maximization of profit, international divisions of labour (that are neutral with respect to neither gender nor race) and the consumption needs of an urban population. Moreover, it becomes apparent in the film that the history of the vases is interwoven with a specific ecological afterlife that will outlive the lifespan of the vases as well as those who produced them. Future and past are inextricably interlinked with one another'.

Martina Ruhsam

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They brought that toxic mud and made three vases of three different sizes. Each vase represents the amount of radioactive material produced as a byproduct of the process. Whether it's for a cell phone, a laptop, or the batteries used in electric cars. So they smuggled themselves, illegally of course, into Chinese territory. They

got hold of some of the mud from the mines and then made three vases. The vases are of different sizes, showing the different proportions of radioactive material in each product. What does this achieve? Rare urban wear draws attention to the link between material matter and capitalism. Between global industry and the earth.

That Mud is not just mud. Mud is a commodity. Mud has a specific role. Mud is entangled with and within global capitalist processes.

That's the idea. One more example. Building Conversation Collectives, Parliament of Things. There's a website for you to take a look at. And one of its projects is called Time Loop.

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Building Conversation Collective,
Parliament of Things

<https://buildingconversation.nl/en/conversation/parlement-van-de-dingen/#:~:text=The%20Parliament%20of%20Things%20is,autonomy%20and%20agency%20of%20objects.>

In *Time Loop*, the collective asked participants to reflect on the deep past – a practice the collective used from the native Indians of Canada.

Conversation Without Words is a performance that explores silence, and was inspired by the annual gathering of Inuit chieftains who sit together in complete silence for hours in order to connect with one another.

The point is to question how knowledge is built, the slow erasure of older forms of knowledge-making (especially by the native Americans, the Inuits and others. It shows how knowledge is co-produced.

The idea is also to explore a different kind of relationship with time, to stop thinking entirely and solely about the present.

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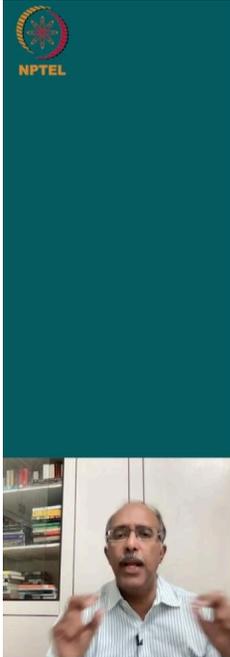
And here the collective asked, the team asked participants to reflect on the deep past, a very deep past. And this is a practice that has been native to the Aboriginal people of Canada. *Conversation Without Words* is a performance piece that explores silence. Everybody was astounded that a conversation is actually possible without words. But it stems from a very old Aboriginal practice of Inuit chiefs who sat together in a kind of gathering and never spoke.

They never speak. They sat in complete silence so that they could still connect with one another. The point here is to ask how knowledge is produced. Is knowledge produced only in conversation? Is knowledge produced in communicating with each other without conversation?

Is silence a form of knowledge-making too? Is silence a form of communication? The idea here is to explore perhaps another way of looking at time. To stop thinking entirely in and about the present. My final example is from Benjamin Vanderwill, Dieter Gruselius, and Helena Julian's *Perisphere*.

This was a series of small dioramas where you could go and lie down on your stomach and look down through a viewing slot. It's like a periscope, which submarines have. And through the periscope, you get an image of the immediate environment. Except that we are looking at it the wrong way. Because you are lying down and looking at the view from the top.

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Benjamin Vandewalle, Dieter Brusselsaers and Helena Julian,
Peri-Sphere

'A series of small dioramas is developed, in which a spectator can lie down on his stomach and look down through a viewing slot. Through a periscope system he will get an image of the immediate environment that is mirrored from a different point of view. In this way, the gaze is disconnected from our exact physical position. By a series of shifting mirrors a montage can be made of different perspectives on the environment. In this way, a different imagination of the environment is established'.

<https://kaaitheater.be/en/agenda/14-15/peri-sphere>

The idea is to explore how vision operates, with a body and with an external apparatus.

What is our point of view? How do we view our environment?

What are the parameters of our perception?

Dieter Brusselsaers and Helena Julian



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So, remember, we are people who walk erect. So, our gaze, our visual method of perception is determined by how we are as people, as persons; we stand erect. There is a series of shifting mirrors in the dioramas, and you get different perspectives on your immediate neighborhood. So, you lie down and watch through a periscope like this. And what you see is basically uncertain because you cannot recognize where you are or how you are viewing things.

The point is, as the artists put it in their own words, what is our point of view? How do we view our environment? What are the parameters of our perception? The larger aim here, then, is to question various kinds of boundaries. Let me recap what I have been speaking about.

All post-human art is an attempt to question boundaries. Whether it is Stella questioning the boundary between the organic and the inorganic. Whether it's the collapse of ideas of space, where the person inside the house is performing living, and the house is itself a performance, our everyday life becomes a performance as a spectacle. In Balthazar, they put together a theatre group which involves one donkey, who is at the centre of attention, and the people trying to engage with it. The whole point here is to think in terms of interspecies collaboration, interspecies engagement.

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In Rare Urban Rare, we discovered how earth is part of, as in, mud is a part of global capital circuits. In Time Loop, silence becomes a mode of knowledge-making. And, of course, in Perisphere, of which there is also a website that you might want to take a look at, we saw how the borders of our perception, the technologies of our points of view, are called into question. Those are also, of course, standard queries and concerns within post-humanism.

Thank you.