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## Essay by Jeffrey Deitch

*On most people's beauty scale, Stacey Stetler would be a 10. A blond, blue-eyed, 5-foot-11 New York model, she has confidently sashayed down the runway for Yves Saint Laurent in Paris and has graced the covers of fashion magazines. But until recently, when Ms. Stetler looked in the mirror she saw less perfection and more flaws. "I was flat-chested," Ms. Stetler said. "You couldn't tell if I was coming or going. My back protruded almost as much as my front." ... Ms. Stetler enhanced her boyish figure by having breast implants. She is not alone.*

The New York Times, 6 February 1992, front page

Stories about breast implants, crash diets, and mood drugs have moved from the health and beauty page to the front page. The public has been galvanized by explosive testimony about sexual harassment and by the sensational rape trials of public figures. Questions about the new boundaries of appropriate interpersonal behavior are attracting unprecedented interest. There is a growing sense that we should take control over our bodies and our social circumstances rather than just accepting what we inherited.

Social and scientific trends are converging to shape a new conception of the self, a new construction of what it means to be a human being. The matter-of-fact acceptance of one's "natural" looks and one's "natural" personality is being replaced by a growing sense that it is normal to reinvent oneself. The Freudian model of the "psychological person" is dissolving into a new model that encourages individuals to dispense with the anguished analysis of how subconscious childhood experiences molded their behavior. There is a new sense that one can simply construct the new self that one wants, freed from the constraints of one's past and one's inherited genetic code.

Human evolution may be entering a new phase that Charles Darwin never would have envisioned. The potential of genetic reconstitution may be quickly propelling us beyond Darwinian natural evolution and into a bold realm of artificial evolution. Our society will soon have access to the biotechnology that will allow us to make direct choices about how we want our species to further evolve. This new techno-evolutionary phase will bring us far beyond eugenics. Our children's generation could very well be the last generation of "pure" humans.

This new sense of one's power to control and, if desired, reconstruct one's body has quickly developed a broad acceptance, but there is still a significant segment of society that is deeply disturbed by its implications. The bitter debate over abortion rights is an example of how explosive the controversy over the limits of "natural" life will become. The battle over the abortion issue and the outcry over euthanasia and the right to choose suicide may be just the beginning of an enormous social conflict over one's freedom to use the new biotechnology to take greater control over one's body and to enhance the course of one's life.

The issue of using genetic engineering to "improve" the fetus will potentially become much more highly charged than the controversy over abortion. It may not be an exaggeration to say that it will become the most difficult moral and social issue that the human species has ever faced. Genetic

engineering is not just another life-enhancing technology like aviation or telecommunications. Its continued development and application may force us to redefine the parameters of life.

Our consciousness of the self will have to undergo a profound change as we continue to embrace the transforming advances in biological and communications technologies. A new construction of the self will inevitably take hold as ever more powerful body-altering techniques become commonplace. As radical plastic surgery, computer-chip brain implants, and gene-splicing become routine, the former structure of self will no longer correspond to the new structure of the body. A new post-human organization of personality will develop that reflects peoples' adaptation to this new technology and its socioeconomic effects.

New approaches to self-realization are generally paralleled by new approaches to art. With each successive transformation of the social environment, great artists have both reflected and helped to define the new personality models that have developed out of society's absorption of technological, political, and social change. Looking back through the history of art, we can see how artists have portrayed the changes in models of self-realization that have accompanied profound changes in the social environment.

Starting with the Renaissance as an example, we can see how an artist such as Hans Holbein the Younger captured the ethos of Humanism in his famous portrait of Erasmus. This new concept of portraiture portrayed a new human attitude that characterized the enhanced sense of self shared by Holbein and his friends. Holbein's portraits also helped to define and communicate this new organization of personality to a broadening audience. The new conception of self that developed with the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century is captured and communicated by Jean-Antoine Houdon in his portrait of Denis Diderot. Theodore Géricault reveals an increasingly complex concept of the individual in his famous portrait of the kleptomaniac. The deepening sense of individuality that characterized the modernist attitude is portrayed and communicated by a succession of great nineteenth century artists from Ingres to Manet.

The modern model of the self goes through numerous phases as the concepts of individual freedom and individual expression become more sharply focused. A more profound model of self that reflects the late nineteenth-century's progressively deeper exploration of the inner mind is manifested in the art of Edvard Munch. The adaptation of personality to the increased velocity of the early-twentieth-century's new urban industrial society is reflected by the Cubist portraits of Picasso. The profound contribution of the Freudian psychological model of the self is communicated through the expressionistic portraiture of Kokoschka. After assimilating the Dada phase, the existential phase, and the celebrity-as-an-art-form Pop phase, the history of the modern self reaches its culmination with the free-for-all, "let it all hang out" ethos of the late 1960s counterculture. The attitude reflected by the body art of Vito Acconci represents both the ultimate fulfillment of modernist unrestrained individualism as well as the undermining of the utopian modern dream. It is both the final phase of the progression of modern models of self-construction and the beginning of a search for a new postmodern construction of personality.

The year 1968 was a watershed, when the culture of Modernism reached both its culmination and its collapse. The sexual, ethnic, and political liberation movements that we associate with 1968 were the logical fulfillment of the modern dream of unrestrained personal freedom, but also represented the shattering of the utopian modern search for absolute truth. The events of 1968 and their repercussions demonstrated a new sense that there were numerous ways to look at the world and numerous equally valid standards of behavior. The long-accepted male-dominated, Eurocentric world view of the Western political, economic, and intellectual power structure began to be punctured.

Although attitudes seem to have regressed since the youth-culture euphoria of the late '60s and early '70s, many of the liberating impulses of 1968 have led to significant changes in the way our society defines itself. There is now a much greater consciousness of the world's multiculturalism and an understanding that not every country aspires to the same modern model of progress that the West once believed to be an unquestioned absolute. Feminism, in particular, has spurred tremendous changes in the structure of society during the past twenty-five years, creating perhaps the most significant revolution in human behavior since the Renaissance. Even the drug culture of the years around 1968 has had its effect on how people perceive the world today. Can corporate executives who experienced the alternative realities of mind-altering drugs while they were college students have as absolute a sense of reality as their parents' generation?

The post-1968 period has been a time of transition, when the radical impulses of the counterculture have slowly penetrated the more traditional segments of society. Along the way, of course, many of the more radical features of counterculture consciousness have been muted, but many of its most significant innovations, such as feminism, have begun to take hold. A distinct new model of behavior and a new organization of personality that is distinct from the modern model is still in the process of developing. The tentative term of "Post Modern" is probably the appropriate one to describe this intermediate state of consciousness that constitutes the transition between the modern model and the new model of reality that we are building.

The obsession with self-awareness and self-improvement in the 1970s (the "Me" decade), and with self-image and self-indulgence in the 1980s, demonstrated the intense interest in redefining and perhaps reformulating society's definition of the self. The new broader understanding of the multiplicity of possible realities has inspired a widespread desire to break with older constraining models of personality. It is becoming routine for people to try to alter their appearance, their behavior, and their consciousness beyond what was once thought possible. The modern era might be characterized as a period of the discovery of self. Our current post-modern era can be characterized as a transitional period of the disintegration of self. Perhaps the coming "post-human" period will be characterized by the reconstruction of self.

The new construction of self is conceptual rather than natural. A key element of the emerging consciousness of personality is that an individual need not be tied to his or her "natural" looks, "natural" abilities, or the ghosts of his or her family history. People used to live not just their own lives but their parents' lives and their children's lives as well. The sense of self was tied to the structure of the family. People had a strong sense of their obligation to the traditions and attitudes of their parents and to their obligation to pass these attitudes on to their children. Now the changing social patterns of our society have led to a sense that people's lives are their own to invent and their own to lead. With the deepening penetration of the electronic media, models of self-construction will increasingly be as likely to be taken from celebrities and other media role models as they will be from parents and grandparents.

The decentered television reality that we experience, with its fragmentation, multiplicity, and simultaneity, is helping to deepen the sense that there is no absolutely "correct" or "true" model of the self. Increasingly people may come to feel that it is no longer relevant to try to "cure" a personality disorder. Instead it may seem more appropriate to try to alter, rather than cure, the self. We are likely to be witnessing the dissolution of the Freudian psychological model with its emphasis on childhood experiences and family background. The latest statistics show that in American inner cities, more than half of the school-age children come from one-parent homes and as many as ten percent from "no parent" homes. The process of self-construction has to be radically different from the way it was in turn-of-the-century Vienna. Many contemporary people have little sense of past and little sense of future, only a sense of the present. Disconnected from traditional

family history, people are more prone to start their self-identity with the present. There is less need to psychologically interpret or "discover" oneself and more of a feeling that the self can be altered and reinvented. Self-identity is becoming much more dependent on how one is perceived by others, as opposed to a deeply rooted sense of inner direction. The world has become a mirror.

Reality, fantasy, and fiction are merging into the inspiration for a new model of personality organization. The interchangeable identities of Madonna and the extraordinary self-transformation of Ivana Trump are examples of this shuffling of reality and fantasy into a reassembled fictional personality that quickly becomes fact. The search for the absolute "true" self has been replaced by a constant scanning for new alternatives.

The contemporary collapse of absolutes applies not only to personality models, but to political and social models as well. The crumbling of Communism in the Soviet Union marked the dissolution of one of the most absolute of all belief systems. In the capitalist sphere, as well, the Japanese bubble economy has been punctured and the ideologies of Reaganism and Thatcherism have been tarnished. Corporate restructurings, with their plant closings and forced early retirements, have shattered the long-nurtured assumption that the modern corporation would make every effort to take care of its dedicated employees. The belief system at the foundation of modern corporatism has been seriously weakened, leading to new models of how individuals perceive their place in the free-market structure.

The public has even experienced an unprecedented collapse of the reputation of many of its most trusted and admired heroes. It turned out that Ben Johnson's astounding athletic prowess was the product of steroids and that Donald Trump's vast wealth was not real, only simulated. The recent deflation of all these "absolutes" in our cultural, socioeconomic, and political environment has set the stage for a new kind of belief structure based on multiple realities and multiple perceptions.

In addition to the way social and economic forces are shaping a new method of seeing and experiencing the world, two extraordinary new technologies will soon be challenging definitions and perceptions of reality in a way that is beyond anything previously imagined. Computer science with its ever closer realization of virtual reality, and biotechnology with the amazing potential of genetic engineering, are on the verge of creating a new environment where most of our assumptions about what is reality and even what is life will have to be reexamined. The combination of these two sets of technologies will create not only new life forms and new communications channels, but will shape new perceptions of time and space and even lead to new structures of thinking.

We are already experiencing a new kind of electronic space and a new kind of simultaneous television time. The former sense of the vast distances that separated, for example, a metals trader in New York from his customer in Tokyo has already been collapsed by twenty-four-hour, on-line trading. Economic space once encompassed a sense of the long journeys involved to move goods and information from one city to another. Now, with computer networks, video conferencing, and DHL overnight service, company offices on different continents can function as if they were next door to each other. The new sense of time experienced through CNN's live broadcasts of the Gulf war and the August 1991 Soviet coup has changed forever the way world affairs will function. There will no longer be the cushion of time between an event and its interpretation in the newspaper. The electronic media has networked the world into a new kind of simultaneous real-time structure, speeding up the course of social interchange. The current communications revolution is likely to be just a prelude, however, to the advent of cyberspace, a vast computer universe that will further restructure our understanding of time and space.

The new electronic time and space also seems to be shaping a new kind of thinking, oriented toward images and sound bites. The former emphasis on deductive rational structures and lengthy narrative has been eclipsed by the electronic media's compressed sense of time. The television audience is

being trained to take in complex issues through quick successions of images and compact, packaged commentary. As previous generations learned structures of complex thinking through essays and novels, today's advanced television generation learns how to think through news anchorpeople and talk-show hosts.

The structure of thinking is changing, and it appears that the quality of thinking is changing as well. Patterns of thinking are becoming less rational. With the collapse of many of the modern era's hierarchical belief systems, and their replacement by multifaceted alternatives, people are moving away from hierarchically structured rational thinking to a more perceptual, less structured outlook and a more irrational mode of thought. An irrational outlook in fact might be a more appropriate approach to a world that seems to have outgrown its modern utopian faith in rational solutions.

This feeling of irrationality is furthered by the sense that the explosive new technologies may also be unleashing some explosive new pathologies. We are experiencing a surge of seemingly untamable viruses: biological, social, environmental, and computer viruses as well. There is a sense that we are advancing but not progressing, mired in a swirl of unexpected side effects that have undermined our belief in a rational order and moved us closer to embracing an irrational model of the world.

Our transition to the post-human world of cyberspace and genetic engineering is occurring gradually. Many of the new attitudes toward the body and the new modes of social behavior do not seem particularly significant in isolation, but viewed together they demonstrate a decided trend toward a radically new model of the self and of social behavior. They constitute a kind of prelude that is likely to make society attitudinally more ready than one would have expected for the truly radical technologies that are soon to come.

It is assumed that the average person can and should alter his or her body through rigorous diet and exercise. The virtues of mind exercise and even of mind-altering drugs have also achieved wide acceptance. Plastic surgery is not only accepted and encouraged by many of our social role models but is enthusiastically shown off. For the generation that has watched and perhaps tried to imitate the self-transformation of Jane Fonda, there is already a strong sense of one's freedom to control and alter one's body. As more powerful technology becomes accessible, the next logical step might be for members of the post-Jane Fonda generation to want to create a genetically improved child who would already incorporate the enhanced physical endowments that years of exercise, liposuction, and implant surgery had accomplished. How large a jump would it be for someone with an elaborate home-computer system to install a chip in his or her brain that stored the entire Encyclopedia Britannica and images of every important painting in art history? The attitudes that may make us ready to embrace the post-human person may already be here.

We are also already well on our way to assimilating a new set of nearly post-human social structures. These new types of social behaviors first seemed to assert themselves in the realm of mating rituals. The social dislocations that began to isolate young people from their traditional family and community networks led to numerous artificial structures to facilitate introductions. First there were personal ads and singles clubs, then singles bars and an organized singles industry. Now, with the threat of AIDS and perhaps a growing sense of human alienation, phone sex has become especially popular. People can conduct fantasy relationships without the mess that often goes along with real human contact. From phone sex it is only a small step to virtual sex, the multisensual sexual experience that people will soon be able to have in three dimensions with their home computer. A virtual-sex program featuring every simulated sound and sensation is not only likely to be better in many ways than the real thing, for future generations it may *become* the real thing.

In Japan, which, as in other areas, is in the vanguard of post-human behavior, there has emerged a new personality type known as Otaku. Otaku people are defined more by their possessions than by

their inherent character. They can be described as a concept of person-as-information. Travellers to Tokyo are often amazed by the proliferation of vending machines for all sorts of goods and services, even for matchmaking. Survey research has shown that much of the popularity of these vending machines is due to the preference of young Japanese for interacting with machines instead of with real people.

These emerging social and technological trends that are redefining our concepts of the self and of social behavior have begun to exert tremendous influence on artists. There is an enormous new artistic interest in the body and in the presentation of the self. Much of today's most innovative new artistic practise involves new concepts of the figure and new approaches to the figure. This new interest in the figure is, however, not to be found where it would traditionally be expected, in painting and in conventional sculpture. The new interest in figuration, in keeping with the social and technological trends that are inspiring it, is conceptual rather than formal. The new figurative art is emerging through the channel of the conceptual, body, and performance art of the late '60s and '70s rather than through the figurative painting tradition.

Many of the most interesting younger artists are dealing with the new conceptions of the body and the new definitions of self that the vanguard of our society is also dealing with. They are exploring through their art the same questioning of traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and self-identity that is taking place in the world at large. Much of the new figurative art is reactive to and descriptive of the "real" world, but it cannot in fact be called realistic in the conventional sense. That is because so much of the "real" world that they are reacting to has in fact become artificial. With the concept of the real disintegrating through an acceptance of the multiplicity of reality models and through the embrace of artificiality. Realism as we used to know it may no longer be possible. This new figurative art may actually mark the end of Realism rather than its revival.

The redefinition of the figure is being approached by a number of artists through its breakup and reassembly. Robert Gober shockingly isolates segments of the body from the whole, creating an eerie new reality of free-floating limbs and disconnected emotions. Body parts are disassembled and reassembled in the sculpture of George Lappas, who also mixes time frames from the past and the present. This shuffling of historical, present, and future time is also characteristic of the approaches of Wim Delvoye and Yasumasa Morimura. The figures in their works function in historical, present, and future time simultaneously, giving a picture of the kind of time mix that is likely to be more and more characteristic of the way we will experience the world.

Time is not the only element that is shuffled. Humans and animals are conflated in the work of Mike Kelley, humans and mannequins in the work of Charles Ray, and humans and machines in the work of Paul McCarthy. These artists present a shocking reformulation of humanity that gives a disquieting glimpse of the coming post-human situation. In Kelley's world, the ever more intense underflow of violence and perversity bubbles over into an uneasy confusion of artificiality, innocence, and bestiality. In Ray's sculpture, frighteningly out of scale mannequins represent intensified visions of post human evolution, drained of all emotion and affect. McCarthy's *Garden* depicts an alien post-human future in which the figure becomes a robotic shell seized by an uncontrollable sexual obsession from which all "human" passion is absent.

Future genetic manipulation may spawn a race of post humans who are outwardly perfect but whose inner neuroses and instincts may not be so easily controlled. Artists are sensitive to this murky underside of displaced urges that may not be quite as easy to re-mold as a pair of flabby thighs. Janine Antoni's cube of gnawed chocolate reveals the neurotic and desperate behavior sometimes hidden beneath the sleek facade of a woman's image perfected through cosmetics. Kiki Smith's flayed bodies, dripping with excretions, bear witness to the emotional wreckage that festers below

the plastic surface. Artists are giving us a frightful warning of the irrational reservoir of dislocated emotions that may overwhelm the advances of technology.

The emphasis on appearance versus essence, a central feature of the new construction of self-identity, is explored by Clegg & Guttmann through their seemingly normal images of corporate-type personalities, which subtly reveal something empty and abnormal underneath. The new way in which personal identity is being constructed is examined through the mind-flow drawings of Karen Kilimnik, which enter into the interplay between models of celebrity and models of self. The fascinating collapse of the border between public and private lives is also explored through Kilimnik's work. As evidenced by the new approaches to the private versus public, in everything from the scrutiny of the personal lives of political candidates to the behind-the-scenes revelations of Madonnas *Truth or Dare*, our entire understanding of the meaning of private life is in the process of being redefined.

The re-creation of self through an embrace of fantasy and fiction is embodied in the life and work of Jeff Koons. In the course of a two-year period, Koons transformed his body and his life through his courtship and marriage with Cicciolina. The biological and material sculpture resulting from their union dissolves the dividing line between artificial and real, creating art that can truly be described as post human.

As the organic, naturally evolving model of human life is replaced by the artificial evolution into the Post Human, art is likely to assume a much more central role. Art may have to fuse with science as computerization and biotechnology create further "improvements" on the human form. Many of the decisions that will accompany the applications of computerized virtual reality and of genetic engineering will be related to aesthetics. Technology will make it possible to remodel our bodies and supercharge our minds, but art will have to help provide the inspiration for what our bodies should look like and what our minds should be doing.

Will the onset of the Post Human mean unprecedented freedom for the individual and for the artist? Will we soon have almost unlimited ability to recreate ourselves and break through the constraints of genetic history? Will we have the opportunity to express ourselves in any way we want through physical appearance? Will we be able to create art that is also biology?

Or will it happen that all these extraordinary new possibilities will result in increased social repression and a push toward conformity? Will the persuasive skills of the advertising industry convince us all to buy the same two or three genetic-improvement programs? Will governments assert their control over the powerful new biotechnology and restrict its use? Or will they take a more aggressive stance, exploiting the new technology to create genetically improved populations for economic and military superiority? Could the world evolve into a nightmarish situation with new, improved Post Humans in the wealthy countries ruling over the "old humans" in countries where the new technologies cannot be readily afforded? All these scenarios remain unclear.

What we do know is that we will soon be forced by technological advances to develop a new morality. We will need to build a new moral structure that will give people a framework of how to deal with the enormous choices they will have to make in terms of genetic alteration and computerized brain enhancement. We will have to face decisions not only about what looks good, but what is good or is bad about the restructuring of the mind and body. The limits of life will no longer be something that can be taken for granted. We will have to create a new moral vision to cope with them. In the future, artists may no longer be involved in just redefining art. In the post human future artists may also be involved in redefining life.