



EXHIBITION

Humanity 2.0

A new exhibition explores how scientific advances are changing what it means to be human

By Giovanni Frazzetto

Complex and unpredictable, technological change invariably shakes our condition. Every new tool or discovery belittles past ambitions and sets renewed destinations. But how are we to keep up with the speed, direction, and magnitude of our own development?

HUMAN+, a new, ambitious, and sharply curated exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona presented in collaboration with the Science Gallery Dublin, delves into the contemporary meaning of being human. It does so with a curiosity for the course our future might take in light of continuing advances in genetic and biomedical research technologies, as well as robotics, engineering, and artificial intelligence.

Hosting more than 50 works created by artists and scientists, the collection explores the strategies that we might use to transcend bodily and mental limits, our place in nature, and our social interactions, as well as redefinitions of birth and death. Although its title is suggestive of an optimistic upgrading for our species, the show is equally wary of taking the benefits of empowerment for granted. Bounc-

HUMAN+

The Future of Our Species

Cathrine Kramer,
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Centre for Contemporary
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ing between the concrete and the utopian, HUMAN+ invites visitors to contemplate their own future and measure the promise and peril of technological emancipation.

In Agatha Haines's stirring installation *Transfigurations*, a row of breathing baby dolls display surgical modifications that are intended to expand their fitness for a variety of biomedical, social, or environmental purposes. For instance, one child has been endowed with extra folds of skin on its scalp to facilitate the dissipation of heat, an asset in times of global warming.

What would it feel like if we could see the world through someone else's eyes? Based on theories of embodied cognition, virtual reality, and mirror neurons, *The Machine to Be Another*, created by the Be Another Lab artistic collective, is exhilarating and one of the most interactive pieces in the show. With the help of immersive goggles, pairs of visitors experience each other's view and gradually learn to anticipate and synchro-

In *Transfigurations*, Agatha Haines imagines a future in which infants are surgically endowed with unusual but advantageous physical features.

nize their movements and intentions. At once pragmatic and visionary, the experiment is deft at enabling empathy and has the potential to address themes such as kinship, gender, and ethnic identity, as well as conflict resolution at the individual and collective level.

By stimulating reward areas in the brain and inspiring proximity, direct eye-to-eye gaze is crucial in modulating social interactions. Named *Area V5*, in reference to the portion of the human cortex that is involved in the perception of motion, an installation by Louis-Philippe Demers probes our interaction with machines. Occupying an entire wall, a mesmerizing collection of robotic eyes roll frenetically as visitors pass by. With each shift in gaze comes the chance of tapping into the "Uncanny Valley," the feeling of discomfort that is elicited by strikingly anthropomorphic semblances.

What if there were ways to bring sophistication to the process of dying? In an enticing twist to the much debated and largely unresolved dilemma of euthanasia, Julijonas Urbonas's slick and morbid *Euthanasia Coaster* is a hypothetical machine that, in the words of the artist, would make people reach death "humanely—with elegance and euphoria." Resembling an amusement park roller coaster, the apparatus consists of an almost 2000-foot-tall tower followed by seven loops of decreasing diameter. Arousing feelings of elation and excitement, the descent from its top would bring the train to a speed of 220 mph, and the successive inversions would impose a deadly 10-g force, causing passengers to experience severe loss of oxygen, tunnel vision, and, ultimately, death.

At the entrance to the exhibition, a 17th-century painting by the Flemish artist Jacob Peter Gowy depicting the myth of Icarus acts as an iconic warning against scientific hubris. Icarus, you may recall, escaped imprisonment thanks to a pair of wings made out of feathers and wax. The wings were built by his father, Daedalus, who cautioned him not to fly too high, lest the sun melt the wax. Euphoric from the thrill of flight, Icarus ignores the admonishment, soars high, and then falls to his death.

Although humans will always push the limits of discovery, each advance warrants collective reflection about its societal, ethical, and cultural effects. Challenging in both its aesthetics and its content, HUMAN+ succeeds as a tinder for an engaging, open, and stimulating dialogue in that direction.

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