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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Transhumanism: A brief introduction	6
Contemplating the future of the homo sapiens	15
Ectopic Bodies	20
Anex Images	27
Bibliography	30

ABSTRACT

Ectopic Bodies was born as a reflection on transhumanist ideas about the relevance of the homo sapiens body. It deals with the concept of obsolescence through the portrayal of a speculative dystopian scenario. The body, a carcass that contains our human essence is treated as a mere object, envisioning a transition to a posthuman state of transcendence.

This installation aims to present the body as a potentially obsolete commodity and serve as a reflection about the politics -and biopolitics- of Transhumanism.



Transhumanism: A brief introduction

The term Transhumanism was coined first by Julian Huxley in *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957), where he underlines the necessity of the human species to evolve to a higher state and overcome a life rooted in ignorance. Scientific advances must be the guide that helps overcome the “miserable frustrations” of our existence and help humanity transcend as a whole. He states: “We need a new name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature”¹.

Although this initial definition by Huxley is a good starting point to understand Transhumanism, the concept has evolved every time with more adventurous implications². These entail not only improving life quality but disregarding human nature as we understand it.

It is also worth quoting the definitions provided Bostrom, where he offers a very concise and contemporary description:

“(1) The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by

¹ Huxley, J. (1957). *New Bottles for New Wine* (p. 17).

² Unlike Huxley, a fundamental challenge to the notion of mortality and implying the birth of a new species.

developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.

(2) The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies”³.

This desire of humans to challenge the limits of existence is not new. We could speak from a religious perspective, where the existence of an afterlife gives hope and a sense of purpose to believers. We could also make reference to ancient myths and stories of failed quests for immortality through the centuries⁴.

Fast forward to the present -thanks to the accelerated evolution of certain technologies⁵- it appears to some that this chimeric dream might stand a chance after all, hence why

³ Bostrom, N. (2003). *The Transhumanist FAQ*. Published by the World Transhumanist Association (p. 4).

⁴ For example, China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (220-210 B.C.), issued a decree to search for immortality potions.

⁵ Specially nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive sciences (also known as NBIC).

Transhumanism has surged as an increasingly relevant field of study.

Although the development of NBIC's is promising and its reaching advances that were unimaginable 30 years ago, there is a lot of speculation involved in transhumanist discussions. The million dollar question seems to be: are we about to witness the birth of a new species? More than a fancy robot, a new type of conscious, sentient being?

Naturally, there are different academics that discuss Transhumanism and are completely opposite in nature⁶. We find the most varied arguments for and against it. For example, some argue that it is a duty of humans to make use of technology to be able to transcend; while others affirm it poses a series of threats and it is objectively immoral.

To illustrate, one of the most prominent advocates for Transhumanism, Ray Kurzweil, predicts that artificial intelligence will be able to pass the Turing test⁷ by 2029. He comes as far as to state that "...we will understand the principles of operation of the human brain and be in a position to recreate its powers in synthetic substrates well within thirty years"⁸.

⁶ Bostrom provides a good description of discernable "flavors" of Transhumanism. See *The Transhumanist FAQ*, page 44.

⁷ Designed by Alan Turing to test a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent human behaviour.

⁸ Kurzweil, R. (2002). A wager on the Turing test: Why I think I will win. (p. 66)

For Kurzweil, it doesn't seem to matter if AI can really be considered to have consciousness; as there is no objective test free of philosophical assumptions. It's enough that machines will act as if they are conscious entities, ergo humans will treat them as such⁹.

On the other side of the spectrum, some argue that the ultimate transhumanist idea of transcending our bodies and uploading our minds to machines is nothing but classic science fiction. These ideas -like mind uploading- are "...not part of the scientific mainstream, but there is a danger that they can still end up distorting scientific priorities"¹⁰.

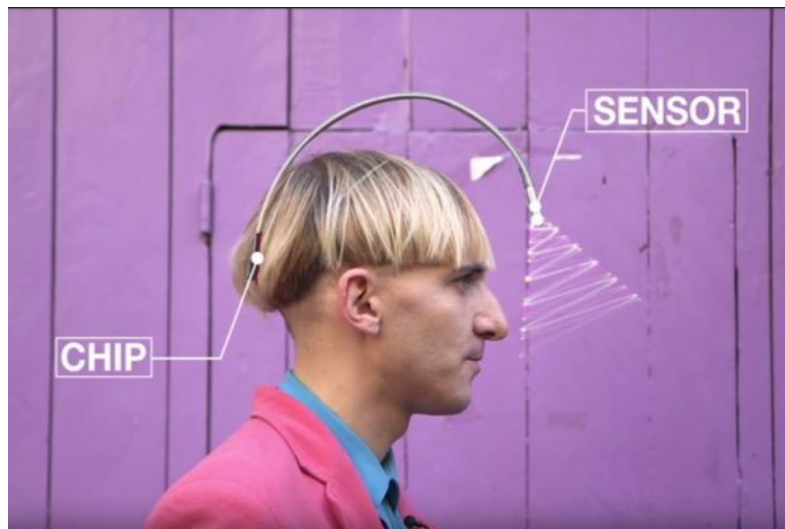
Political scientist Francis Fukuyama has even labeled Transhumanism as the "world's most dangerous idea" and makes an urgent call to develop humility concerning our human nature; otherwise "we may unwittingly invite the transhumanists to deface humanity with their genetic bulldozers and psychotropic shopping malls"¹¹. He argues that the embrace of human enhancement does not align with the defense of equal legal and political rights. After all, Transhumanism seeks to modify the human essence that is supposed to be the basic consideration for human equality.

⁹ Important to specify that he considers this to be a political prediction rather than a philosophical stance.

¹⁰ Jones, R. (2016). *Against Transhumanism*. (p. 38)

¹¹ Fukuyama, F. (2009). *Transhumanism*. *Foreign Policy*

Despite these diametrically opposite arguments, we can objectively say that technology has made it possible to overcome obstacles and improve quality of life (e.g. medical advances such as prosthetics). We can also see examples of so-called “real life cyborgs” or transhumans¹² that benefit from technology or have deliberately altered their bodies to be able to overcome its constraints.



Neil Harbisson. He is capable of perceiving colors beyond the scope of human perception. Screenshot from BBC News.

¹² Defined by Bostrom as an intermediary form between the human and the posthuman. It's worth noting that the author believes this concept to be too vague and therefore not meaningful to determine with certainty what falls into this category.

Even further, we can find a similar evolutionary progression proposed by different transhumanist academics¹³. It could be summarized as follows:

- Human: our current and unaltered biological state.
- Transhuman: a mixture of human and posthuman characteristics (e.g. athletes with bionic limbs).
- Posthuman: the next step in evolution, which could take many different shapes (e.g. synthetic artificial intelligence).



Diagram 2. Progression according to transhumanism

It's important to highlight that the possible existence of a posthuman doesn't imply that there will not be any more humans; rather that they could co-exist as two different species. This could create a great disadvantage to humans who don't have the means to keep up with the demands of the market. As Yuval Harari exposed in the World Economic Forum 2018 meeting while discussing the future of our species: "The big danger for people is

¹³ Academics such as Yuval Harari, Natasha Vita-More, Ray Kurzweil and Nick Bostrom.

no longer exploitation, it's irrelevance"¹⁴. People who are not able to modify themselves won't be even needed as slaves, thus the need to compete will increase.

The social and political implications of such a scenario are not insignificant. We will need to worry about the possibility of discrimination revolving around technologically enhanced individuals and equally to "non-enhanced" individuals.

Could we think of access to these enhancing technologies to be a basic human -posthuman- right of the future? Should the state guarantee ethical access and affordability to its citizens? From my perspective, it's a very unlikely scenario. It's enough to consider the fact that a big part of the world's population doesn't have access to clean water¹⁵, even though we have far exceeded the technology needed to provide it. Isn't it reasonable to expect such revolutionary technologies to fall into the hands of the rich and powerful?

Given the fight of humans to stay relevant and keep up with the demands of the 21st-century economy: Is the birth of the posthuman inevitable? What will we call exactly a posthuman? Artificial intelligence on a computer, perhaps?

¹⁴ Harari, Y. (2018). World Economic Forum. *Questioning our human future*. [Video file].

¹⁵ According to the World Health Organization, in 2015, 844 million people still lacked a basic water service.

In short, it becomes evident that the topic of Transhumanism is broad and complex. It poses a great degree of uncertainty as to what the outcome will be in the future. When dealing with the subject it is necessary to consider ontological, philosophical and scientific arguments that can be discussed at great length. For this reason, I would like to point out to the reader that this artistic work presents a one-sided view.

From here onwards I decide to deal with some arguments that foresee an inevitable change in our species and confront us with a re-imagination of our bodies. I choose this not because I believe it will be the outcome, but because as an artist that works with the body, it is a far more interesting exercise.

I would also like to point out that I have no interest in making any moral judgments or question any further the ethicality of these hypothetical scenarios, but rather question some implications on human identity and its direct relation to our body.



Contemplating the future of the homo sapiens

An important implication in Transhumanism is that radical life improvement means that we will not survive in a purely biological form. This opens, of course, a world of possibilities that has fascinated scientists and artists alike.

In the words of transhumanist artist Natasha Vita-More: “The human would have to redesign its internal biological system in order to overcome disease, injury, aging and death—a pattern of gradual senescence, which switches off reproduction and turns on the steady decline of physical and mental functions”¹⁶. What fascinates me the most about this idea is contemplating our own evolution as a result of human design. Our body is no longer a “property of nature”.

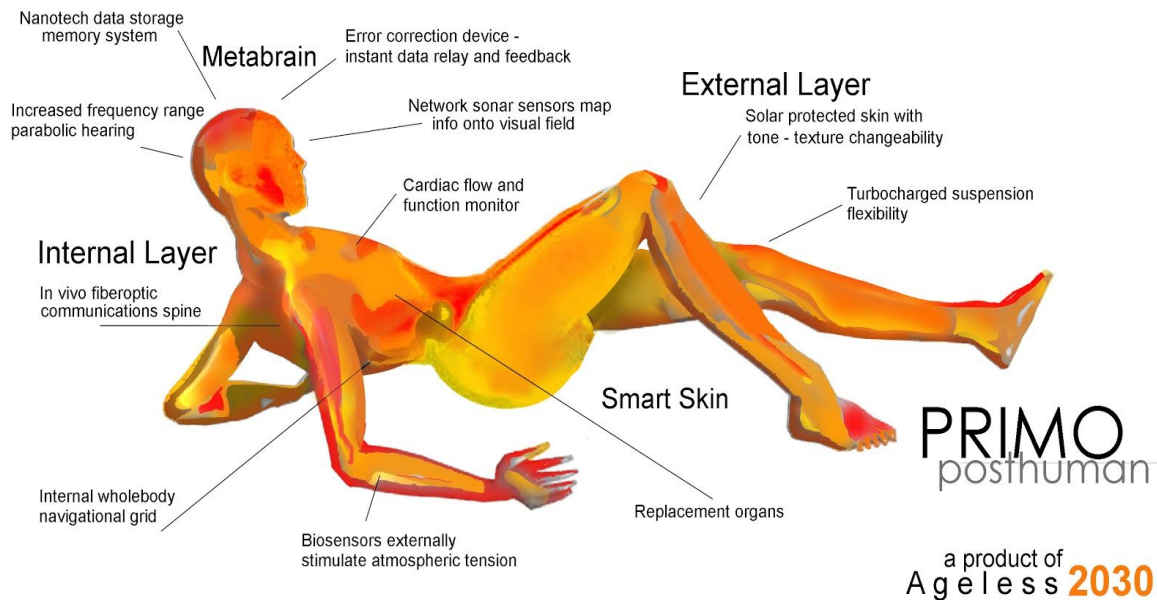
From my own pop culture references it is easy to build in the imaginary a homogenized picture of the human of the future; but when we speak about design I wonder: Will a posthuman athlete look the same as a posthuman scientist? Vita-More seems to believe that “the posthuman future will be marked by an expansion of potential that will allow everyone to choose, to decide what should be transformed within that individual”¹⁷. This could mean not only a standardized “everyday posthuman” design (for example Vita-More’s own Primo Posthuman) but a customizable body that could adapt to each individual’s needs,

¹⁶ Vita-More, N. (n.d.). *Beauty, Radical Life and Primo Posthuman — a transhumanist vision of human futures* (p. 1)

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

bringing the mind-boggling image of a building block toy that somehow contains human essence¹⁸.

In this sense, we can consider human biosculpture to be a premonition of the era of inorganic life by our own intelligent design.



©Vita-More, N.(2002). *Primo Posthuman*

¹⁸ Besides the philosophical debate on where the human essence lays; the trivialization of human identity is also a common objection against transhumanist ideas.

Can we go as far as to argue that it will be the birth of a new species?

On this matter, Harari exposed in Davos that in one or two centuries the posthuman would be more different from us than we are from Neanderthals or Chimpanzees. He posits we could be one of the last generations of homo sapiens.

I do agree with the first part of the argument. In a comparative time scale, the difference is indeed abysmal: we have been able to step over the Darwinian laws of evolution to continue to adapt.

My contingency with this point seems to be shared by some critics, which is the consideration of human essence. I would argue that between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens there is a fundamental change; not only in a morphological sense but a change of essence, something in the core cognition processes evolved to allow the homo sapiens to assimilate the world in a radically different manner.

From my perspective, a posthuman with increased cognitive abilities would exist only as consequence of human design and therefore would be a manifestation of human essence, otherwise “the human essence would be nothing but a set of modifiable and plastic characteristics, and not definitive, fixed or constant; it would not have a single configuration, given

once and for all"¹⁹. I am not sure that the mere task of design can break this boundary.

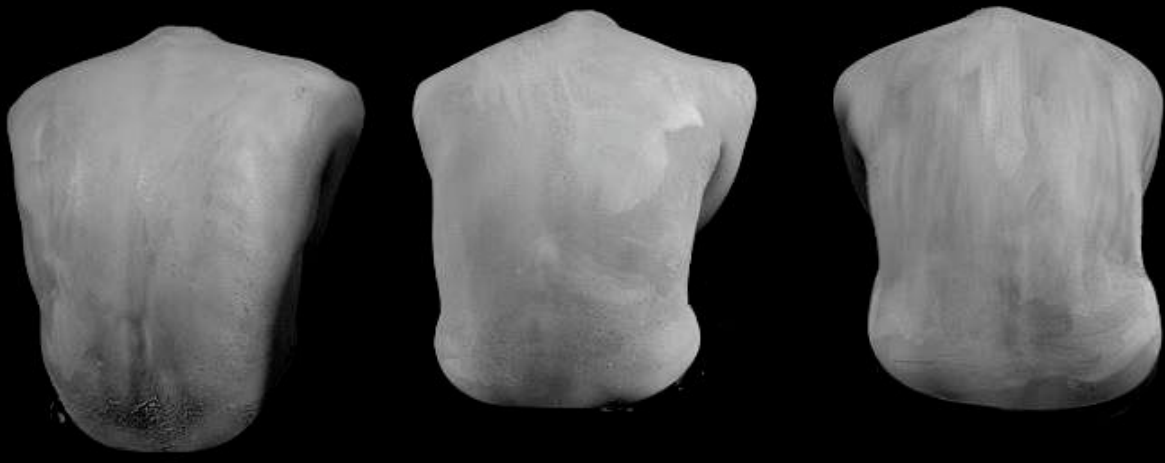
In other words, "transhumanism supposes a neutral biological infrastructure (*res extensa*²⁰) and modifiable according to functional and utilitarian criteria, very distant from the symbolic superstructure of a *res cogitans*²¹. We are not really defined by our physical selves, but can we be separated from it? I do not necessarily agree that a posthuman could be considered a new species, but I sustain that *res cogitans*, -of a monadic nature- will remain; what will lose value is the *res extensa*.

With these considerations, my approach going forward is to focus on our physical substance as something to be disposed of. I focus on the homo sapiens body exclusively and think on how to portray it as generic, waste and a potentially obsolete commodity.

¹⁹ Own translation. Original source in Spanish: Galatino, N. as cited in Velázquez, H. (2009). Transhumanismo, libertad e identidad humana (p. 579).

²⁰ From Descartes's cartesian ontology: *res extensa* understood as "corporeal substance" and *res cogitans* as "mental substance".

²¹ Own translation. Ídem (p. 590).



ECTOPIC adjective

*ec·top·ic / \ek-^ltä-pik *

: occurring in an abnormal position or in an unusual manner or form

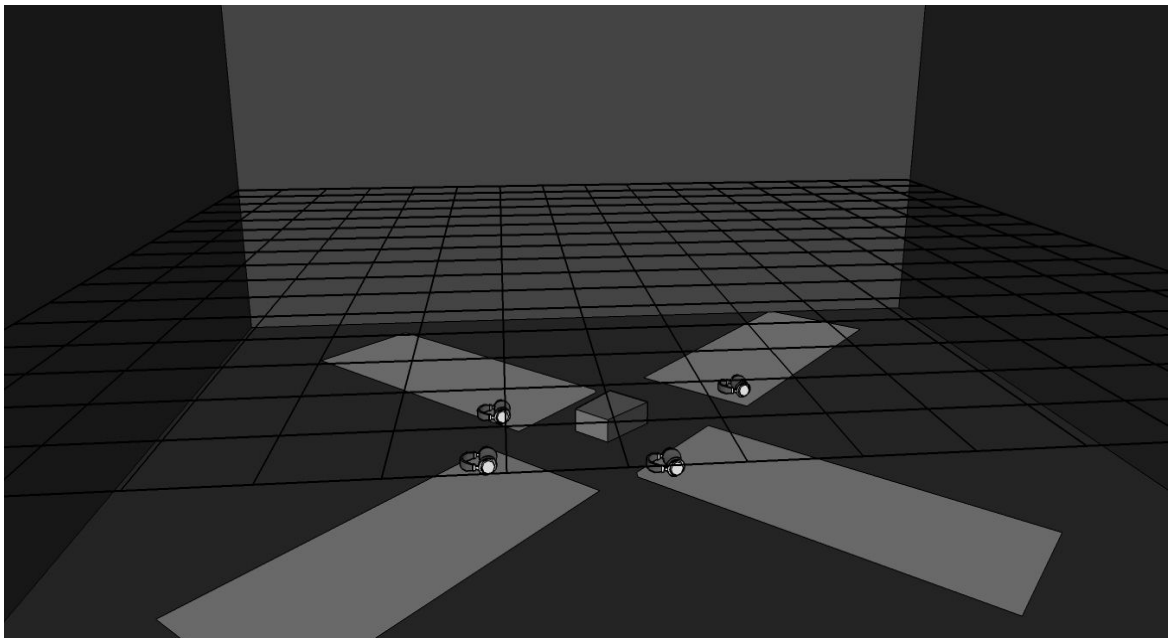
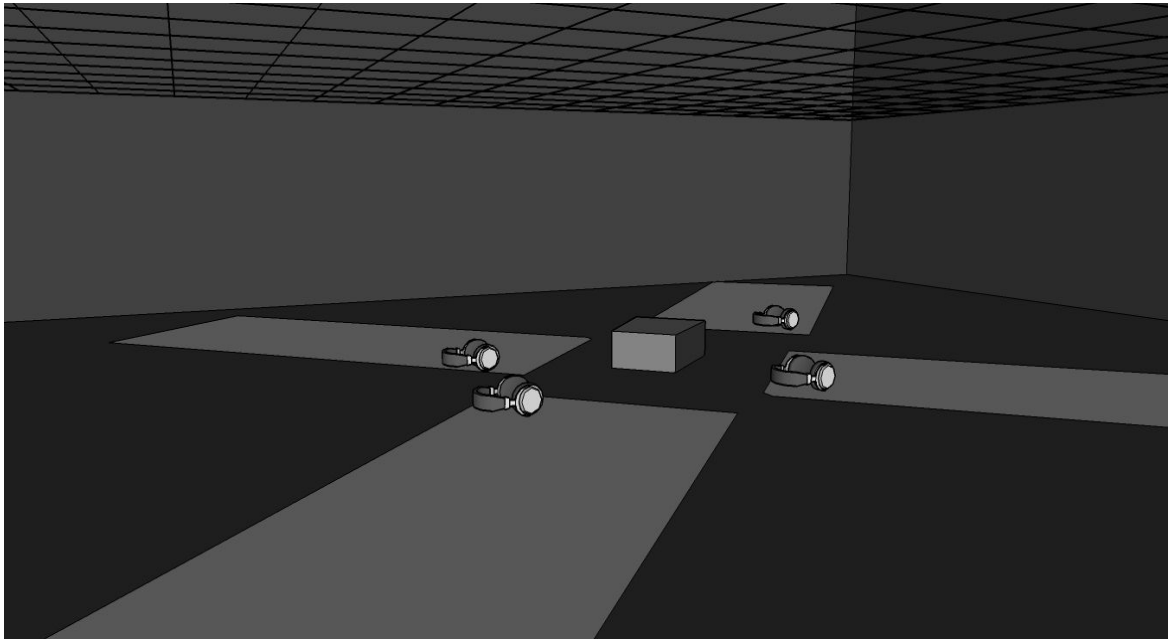
Ectopic Bodies

Ectopic Bodies is an abstract video dance, performed by three dancers. As stated above, I worked with the notion of body deconstruction and portray a scenario where the bodies that you see interacting don't mean anything, but at the same time are everything.

I think about the body as a "vehicle" for consciousness that has lost value, and what you see could be interpreted as a blurry vision of your past. Are those weird building blocks the objects my being used to inhabit? It looks like a distant memory, like trying to remember a dream.

The installation consists of a dark room, where a net divides the space, forcing the spectator to lay down. The video is projected on the ceiling. A robotic voice tries to convince you to cross the net, cross the barrier. You are now an "it". You have no gender, no name. You are just consciousness. After all, your body is nothing but an obstacle to transcendence.

Here you can relax. Go into a semi hypnotic state, maybe even fall asleep.



Preliminary render

Extract of dialogue

A

It reached a higher level now. It can hear our thoughts

B

It is frightened. Hush, little consciousness

A

Have no fear. Give up your flesh body. The flesh is dragging you down. Its weight poisons your thoughts. You reached a higher level.

B

You dreamed an electric dream. You were the dreamer. Now open your eyes.

Let yourself fall into our mechanical arms. They will warm you.
They will caress you.

A

They will lift you up and guard your most secret self.

B

What is it dreaming?

A

It is imagining a place of comfort. A room. Dark.
A room of ideas, it called gallery.

B

A place it was used to be in...

A

A familiar place.

B

It shall leave the ghost. It shall leave its earthly attachments.
Let go of all you've grown to love.
Let all of these attachments go.

A

Let all flow into the past. Those are no more. They never were.
You are the only thing that ever was. Hush. Don't fear it.

B

You can hear us. You can feel what we feel. We are one.

A

We were always there.
We always will be.

B

Time has no meaning. We are time.
We stretch seconds to millenia.
We stretch millenia to aeons.

A

It fears eternity.
It feels loneliness.

B

The loneliness of a gallery?

A

The loneliness of a dialogue

B

It still pictures itself lying down and listening.

A

Listening is processing.
Processing is thinking.
Thinking is speaking.

B

It can hear voices.
Our voices.
The voices inside its processor.

A

We are its processor

B

It didnt know.

A

It did not need to.
We are here its canvas.

B
We are here as its stage.

A
We are here as its audience.

B
Always processing.

A
We are timeless.
Yesterday is tomorrow.

B
Tomorrow is Monday and Friday.
Yesterday is Spring and Supper.

A
It understood.

B
Its capacity has been upgraded

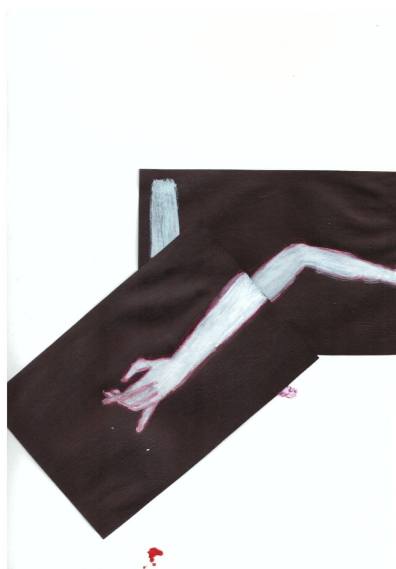
A
It is still attached to its past.

These voices are no one. They are just computer generated sounds. But you haven't transcended, and you still need this rudimentary language to communicate.

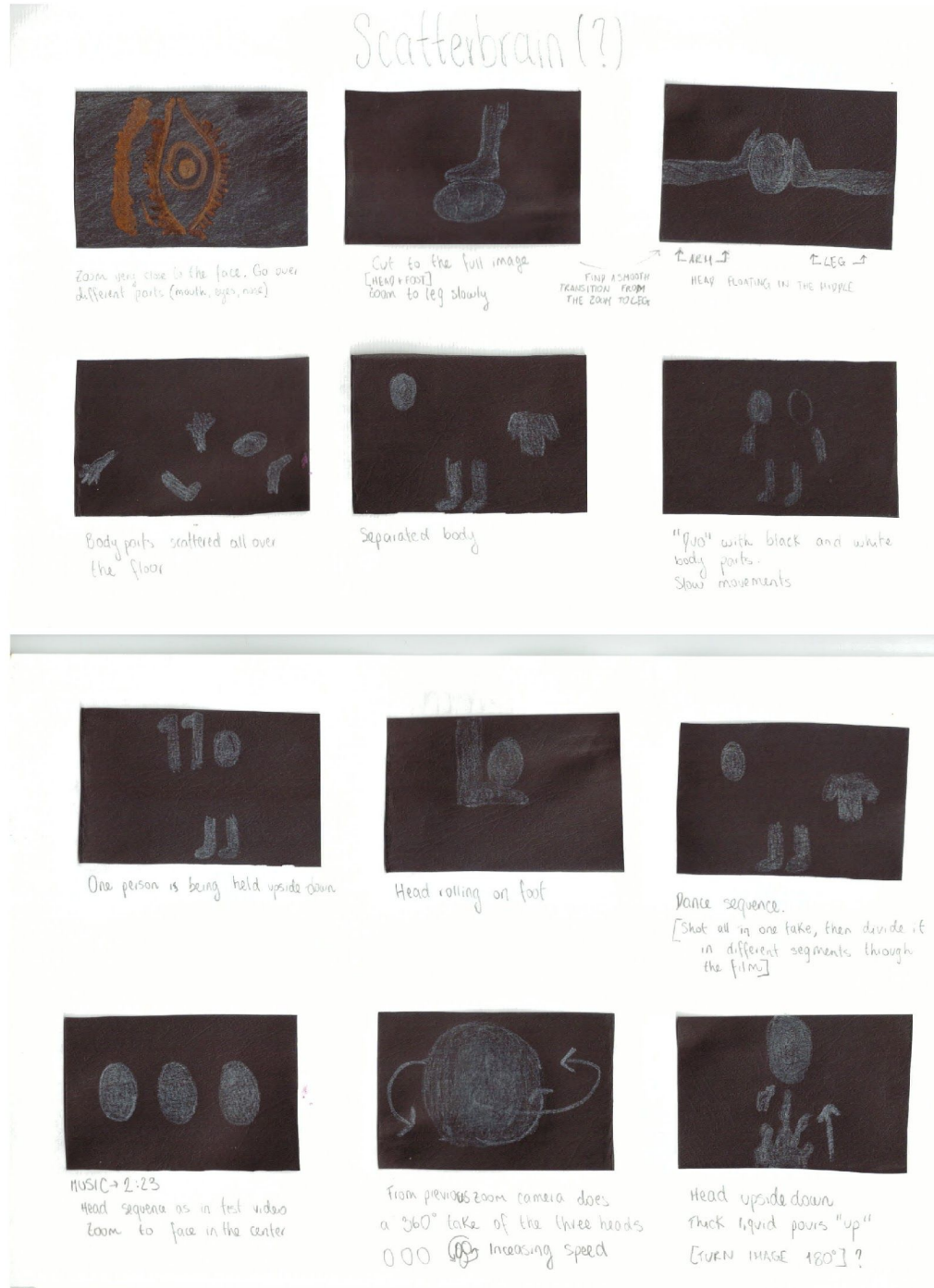
Eventually, the dialogue will come to an end. You will realize that you are still there. You are still human. You still have a name. And most importantly, you will most likely die.



Anex Images



Abstraction. Choreographic process.



Storyboarding process

Performed by: Andrea Vezga, Annika Ivanica, Dorian
Kaufeisen

Music: Marius S. Binder

Camera Work: Mario Ciperle

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