

CRISTIANA URSACHE

**THE VIRTUAL BODY AND AI MEDIATED INTIMACY: NEW
FORMS OF PRESENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ART**

Cristiana Ursache

National University of Arts „George Enescu”, Iași

Email: cristiana.ursache@gmail.com

Abstract: The expansion of technology and the integration of artificial intelligence into the visual arts have generated new modes of representation and understanding of art. This article explores how virtual identities, avatars, and AI based digital entities are transforming notions of presence and intimacy in contemporary art. Starting from recent works that utilize machine learning, the analysis highlights how these technologies destabilize traditional distinctions between the physical and digital body. A central aspect of this research is the way AI influences the relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the audience, generating participatory and immersive aesthetic experiences. Works by artists such as Memo Akten demonstrate how AI animated avatars can function as identity extensions, mediums of selfexploration, or even simulacra. In this context, we ask: can a digital presence mediate or intensify artistic intimacy? How does AI redefine the boundaries between the authentic and the artificial, the real and the simulated?

Keywords: digital avatars; artificial intelligence; virtual presence; digital intimacy; posthuman body; generative art; immersive experience.

**CORPUL VIRTUAL ȘI INTIMITATEA MEDIATĂ DE IA: NOI FORME
DE PREZENȚĂ ÎN ARTA CONTEMPORANĂ**

Rezumat: Dezvoltarea tehnologiei și integrarea inteligenței artificiale în artele vizuale au generat noi moduri de reprezentare și de înțelegere a artei. Acest articol explorează modul în care identitățile virtuale, avatarele și entitățile digitale bazate pe IA transformă noțiunile de prezență și intimitate în arta contemporană. Pornind de la

lucrări recente care utilizează învățarea automată, analiza evidențiază modul în care aceste tehnologii destabilizează distincțiile tradiționale dintre corpul fizic și cel digital. Un aspect central al acestei cercetări este modul în care IA influențează relația dintre artist, opera de artă și public, generând experiențe estetice participative și imersive. Lucrările unor artiști precum Memo Akten demonstrează modul în care avatarele animate de IA pot funcționa ca extensii ale identității, mijloace de autoexplorare sau chiar simulacre. În acest context, ne întrebăm: poate o prezență digitală să medieze sau să intensifice intimitatea artistică? Cum redefinește IA granițele dintre autentic și artificial, dintre real și simulat?

Cuvinte-cheie: avatare digitale; inteligență artificială; prezență virtuală; intimitate digitală; corp postuman; artă generativă; experiență imersivă.

1. Introdúcere

The expanding field of artificial intelligence has intensified and complicated longstanding debates on presence, embodiment, and mediation within contemporary art. As algorithmic agents, synthetic voices, and mechanically animated avatars circulate across exhibition spaces, online platforms, and immersive environments, assumptions inherited from modernity regarding what constitutes “real” presence are radically unsettled. The body, once treated as a biological substrate guaranteeing authenticity, is now articulated as a distributed field of potential modulated across interfaces, datasets, and networked infrastructures. Presence becomes computationally enacted rather than naturally given, while intimacy long associated with shared physical space frequently arises from remote sensing, algorithmic anticipation, and recursive feedback loops that bind humans and machines in unexpected relational configurations.

Within this shifting conceptual landscape, AI based artistic practices enact what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a deterritorialization of the body¹. Rather than functioning as a stable organism or representational unit, the body assumes the form of a machinic diagram a Body without Organs composed of intensities, connections, and operational relations. The virtual body is not a mere representation of identity but an active field of forces that produces new modes of becoming. In this sense, AI artworks do not simply imitate life; they reorganize its conditions of appearance, dissolving boundaries between human and technical agency. The digital turn thereby reconfigures embodiment not as a fixed essence but as a gradient of possibilities distributed across multiple ontological registers.

Such a reorientation situates AI art within a broader genealogy of media ontologies. Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman subject, defined by transversal relationality², provides a key theoretical foundation for understanding how AI generated entities complicate anthropocentric

frameworks of agency and embodiment. Hayles's analysis of distributed cognition³ similarly reveals how human thought and machine operations are mutually entangled within hybrid cognitive ecologies. Franco "Bifo" Berardi's reflections on infosphere affectivity⁴ clarify how desire, vulnerability, and relational attachment are modulated by algorithmic infrastructures, while Guattari's theory of machinic assemblages⁵ offers tools for understanding the virtual body as a transversal formation that exceeds the limits of organic corporeality.

In this expanded field, embodiment is no longer reducible to biological materiality. Mark Hansen's argument that the body functions as a medium of affective experience rather than representational anchor⁶ is especially pertinent for AI based works, which activate sensation, anticipation, and desire in ways that bypass conventional aesthetic norms. Haraway's cyborg manifesto⁷ and Massumi's emphasis on affective modulation⁸ further illuminate the nonrepresentational logics through which machinic bodies operate. Presence becomes iterative and procedural; intimacy becomes infrastructural, distributed across sensors, protocols, and predictive models.

This ontological shift is vividly illustrated in the work of contemporary artists. Memo Akten's *Learning to See*⁹ foregrounds neural networks as co-authors of perception, revealing vision not as a stable faculty but as a probabilistic, hallucinatory process. In these works, human movement and machine interpretation coproduce an ecology of perception in which visibility becomes a negotiation between pattern recognition and sensory anticipation. Refik Anadol's *Machine Hallucinations*¹⁰ dissolves the human body into informational flux: databodies emerge as undulating architectures of light, sensation, and algorithmic mutation that challenge the stability of subjective boundaries. In this model, the virtual body appears not as avatariar figure but as immersive field a luminous, computational BwO in constant modulation.

Lu Yang's *DOKU avatars*¹¹ present a different but equally radical reconfiguration of subjectivity. These genderless, transcultural figures enact rituals, choreographies, and metamorphoses that refuse fixed

identity categories. Yang's work treats the virtual body as a site of experimentation, a mechanically animated desiring machine that multiplies possible selves beyond biological constraints. Ed Atkins's hyperreal avatars in *Ribbons*¹² pursue the inverse path: their digitally rendered flesh suffers, bleeds, and collapses despite its immateriality, producing a melancholic tension between machinic indifference and human affective projection. These avatars dramatize a paradox at the heart of AI intimacy the desire for vulnerability in entities that cannot die.

Taken together, such practices demonstrate that AI-mediated embodiment manifests in multiple modalities: distributed, environmental, avatarial, or spectral. Yet in each instance, the body functions not as representation but as process. It becomes a machinic becoming that destabilizes ontological certainty and reorients the aesthetic encounter toward emergent, relational, and algorithmically modulated experiences. The virtual body thus operates not as a metaphor for the future but as an operational condition of the present.

These transformations carry profound implications for curatorial practice. Traditional exhibition models structured around object stability, visual legibility, and spatial arrangements are insufficient for artworks that exist as datasets, processes, or real time computational systems. Exhibiting AI demands a curatorial reorientation toward relational orchestration rather than object preservation.

The curator becomes a mediator of systems, responsible not only for interpretive frameworks but for infrastructural stability, ethical transparency, and technical maintenance. Exhibiting AI is not simply an aesthetic act; it requires engagement with computational power, server dependencies, network protocols, ecological costs, and algorithmic opacity. In this sense, curatorial practice increasingly resembles what Guattari described as an ecosophic activity, one that must simultaneously address environmental, social, and mental ecologies. The exhibition space transforms into a site where technical infrastructures and affective relations are entangled, demanding curatorial decisions that extend far beyond questions of display and interpretation.

This infrastructural turn compels curators to confront the material conditions underpinning immaterial aesthetics. AI artworks are sustained by data centers, energy-intensive computational processes, and global supply chains that remain largely invisible within exhibition narratives. Making these conditions legible becomes an ethical imperative. As Latour argues, critical practice must shift from debunking representations to tracing networks of relations that sustain them. Curating AI thus entails exposing not only what algorithms show, but how they operate, what they conceal, and whom they privilege. Transparency becomes not a matter of explanation alone, but of curatorial responsibility toward audiences who are increasingly implicated within algorithmic regimes of perception and control.

Within this context, Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra offers a crucial lens for understanding AI-mediated presence. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes a cultural condition in which representations no longer refer to an underlying reality but generate their own self-referential systems of meaning. The simulacrum is not a false copy of the real; it is a production that precedes and replaces the real, creating what Baudrillard terms hyperreality. AI-generated bodies, avatars, and synthetic environments operate precisely within this regime. They do not simulate a preexisting human presence; they produce presence as a computational effect, a hyperreal manifestation that destabilizes distinctions between authenticity and fabrication.

In AI art, the virtual body is no longer anchored to an original referent. It emerges as a self-sustaining operational entity, generated through probabilistic inference rather than mimetic correspondence. This condition exemplifies Baudrillard's third-order simulacrum, where signs circulate without grounding, producing an excess of presence that paradoxically empties the notion of presence itself. Yet rather than signaling the end of meaning, this hyperreal condition opens a new aesthetic and curatorial field in which intimacy, affect, and relationality are reconfigured. The question is no longer whether AI bodies are real or artificial, but how they function within regimes of perception, desire, and attachment.

AI-mediated intimacy thus occupies an ambivalent position. On one hand, it risks reinforcing what Baudrillard identifies as the collapse of the real into endless simulation, where affect is pre-programmed and relationality becomes predictive rather than reciprocal. On the other hand, contemporary artistic practices often exploit this very condition to produce critical awareness. By foregrounding the artificiality of machinic presence, artists expose the mechanisms through which intimacy is engineered, anticipated, and modulated. The simulacrum becomes not a deception but a diagnostic tool, revealing the operational logic of late techno capitalist subjectivity.

This ambivalence is particularly evident in works that deploy conversational agents, emotional AI, or responsive avatars. These systems simulate empathy, recognition, and care through statistical patterning, generating a form of intimacy that is both compelling and unsettling. Baudrillard's warning about the substitution of lived experience with its operational model resonates strongly here. Yet the aesthetic encounter with such systems often produces a reflexive rupture: viewers recognize themselves as participants in a hyperreal exchange, confronted with the machinic production of affect that mirrors their own algorithmically mediated lives.

From a curatorial perspective, this recognition can be mobilized productively. Exhibitions that foreground simulation rather than conceal it resist the anesthetizing effects of hyperreality. They invite audiences to reflect on their complicity within systems that preempt desire, anticipate behavior, and modulate affect. In this sense, curating AI becomes an exercise in what Baudrillard might call symbolic reversal: a strategy that disrupts the smooth circulation of signs by exposing their excess and artificiality. The exhibition space becomes a site of critical friction rather than seamless immersion.

Preservation and temporality further complicate this landscape. AI artworks often depend on mutable datasets, evolving algorithms, and real-time inputs that resist traditional archival logic. Baudrillard's notion of disappearance is instructive here. In hyperreal systems, objects do not decay; they vanish through obsolescence, replacement, or informational saturation. Similarly, AI artworks risk disappearing

not through physical degradation but through software incompatibility, platform collapse, or data loss. Curatorial strategies must therefore grapple with preservation as a dynamic process, one that maintains the conditions of operation rather than fixing the artwork in a stable form.

This shift challenges institutional frameworks predicated on permanence and authorship. If an artwork continuously generates new outputs, where does authorship reside? In the artist's initial code, in the dataset, in the machine's autonomous operations, or in the audience's interaction? Baudrillard's critique of production and originality suggests that such questions cannot be resolved through attribution alone. Instead, they reveal a systemic transformation in which meaning emerges from circulation, repetition, and difference rather than origin. Curating AI thus entails managing a field of relations rather than conserving discrete objects.

The spectator's role is similarly transformed. AI installations often solicit participation not as optional engagement but as a constitutive component of the work's operation. Sensors track movement, systems respond to presence, and algorithms adapt to behavioral input. The audience becomes data, and participation becomes extraction. This dynamic recalls Baudrillard's analysis of interactive media as sites where agency is simulated rather than enacted. Yet contemporary AI art frequently subverts this logic by rendering data capture visible, staging moments of discomfort or refusal that interrupt the fantasy of seamless interaction.

Intimacy, in this framework, is neither purely affective nor entirely simulated; it is infrastructural. It arises from repeated exposure, algorithmic familiarity, and predictive modulation. The virtual body becomes intimate not because it resembles the human, but because it operates within the same systems that structure contemporary social life. As Berardi suggests, affect today circulates through technical interfaces, producing forms of attachment that are fragile, fragmented, and highly mediated. AI art intensifies this condition, making visible the machinic architectures through which intimacy is produced and regulated.

The proliferation of AI-generated bodies and presences demands a reconceptualization of curatorial ethics. Beyond representation and interpretation, curators must address issues of consent, data governance, ecological impact, and algorithmic bias. Baudrillard's insistence that simulation is not neutral but politically charged underscores the necessity of such engagement. To curate AI responsibly is to intervene within systems that shape perception, behavior, and desire at a planetary scale.

Intimacy has traditionally been theorized as a condition grounded in proximity, corporeal co-presence, and affective reciprocity. Within modern and phenomenological frameworks, intimacy presupposes the shared temporality of bodies, the immediacy of perception, and the mutual exposure of vulnerability. In aesthetic contexts, this understanding has often translated into an emphasis on scale, tactility, and spatial closeness as guarantors of authentic relational experience. However, the emergence of AI-mediated artistic practices fundamentally destabilizes these assumptions, requiring a redefinition of intimacy beyond physical co-presence and toward distributed, computational forms of relationality.

In AI-based art, intimacy is no longer produced through spatial nearness but through operational coupling. Algorithms anticipate gestures, predict behavioral patterns, and adapt outputs in real time, generating a sense of recognition that mimics responsiveness. This form of intimacy is neither purely affective nor strictly representational; it is procedural. As Hayles has argued, cognition itself has become distributed across human and nonhuman agents, and intimacy follows a similar trajectory. It emerges from feedback loops in which perception, data capture, and algorithmic inference converge, producing an experience of being addressed without a stable addressing subject.

This shift from embodied intimacy to algorithmic relationality introduces a paradox. On one hand, AI systems intensify intimacy by sustaining continuous attention, responsiveness, and personalization. On the other, they hollow out reciprocity by replacing mutual exposure with predictive modelling. Franco "Bifo" Berardi's analysis of affective economies within the infosphere is instructive here: affect no

longer circulates primarily through interpersonal exchange but through technical modulation, producing attachments that are fragile, asynchronous, and often asymmetrical. Intimacy becomes less a shared state than a calibrated effect.

Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation provides a critical framework for understanding this transformation. In a regime of simulation, intimacy does not disappear; it becomes hyperreal. AI-mediated intimacy does not refer back to an original emotional bond but operates as a self-referential system that produces the *feeling* of closeness without requiring lived reciprocity. The algorithm does not feel, yet it generates affective responses that are experientially convincing. This does not render intimacy false, but it relocates it within a system of signs, predictions, and probabilities that precede subjective intention.

Crucially, contemporary artists do not merely reproduce this condition; they expose it. By staging encounters with machinic entities that simulate care, empathy, or vulnerability, AI-based artworks foreground the tension between affective response and ontological absence. The viewer's emotional investment becomes a site of critical awareness, revealing how intimacy is engineered rather than spontaneously generated. What emerges is a form of reflexive intimacy an awareness of being emotionally engaged by a system that does not reciprocate in human terms.

From a curatorial perspective, this reconfiguration of intimacy demands careful mediation. Exhibitions must avoid reinforcing the illusion of seamless relationality and instead articulate the infrastructural conditions through which intimacy is produced. Making visible the mechanisms of prediction, data extraction, and algorithmic bias allows intimacy to function as a critical vector rather than a purely immersive effect. The goal is not to negate emotional engagement, but to situate it within its technological and political conditions.

Ultimately, AI-mediated intimacy challenges the humanist assumption that closeness requires physical presence or shared embodiment. It reveals intimacy as a relational configuration shaped by technical systems, temporal modulation, and affective anticipation.

In contemporary art, intimacy no longer belongs exclusively to the domain of the interpersonal; it operates at the intersection of bodies, machines, and data flows. To engage with AI-based practices is therefore to confront intimacy as an infrastructural condition one that is simultaneously seductive, unsettling, and deeply symptomatic of posthuman modes of presence.

The virtual body, then, is not a speculative fiction but an operational reality. It deterritorializes embodiment, redistributes agency, and reconfigures intimacy across human and machinic actors. Far from signaling the disappearance of the body, AI-mediated presence multiplies its forms, producing new assemblages of affect, computation, and imagination. The challenge for contemporary art and curatorial practice is not to restore a lost authenticity, but to navigate the hyperreal conditions of the present with critical awareness, ethical rigor, and conceptual precision.

In engaging with AI, curators and artists are not merely exhibiting technology; they are staging encounters with the conditions that increasingly define contemporary existence. The exhibition becomes a laboratory for negotiating posthuman presence, where simulation, intimacy, and embodiment are no longer oppositional terms but interdependent processes. To curate the virtual body is to work within this tension, acknowledging both the risks and possibilities of machinic becomings, and to develop frameworks capable of sustaining meaning in a world where presence itself has become computational.

Exhibitions such as Crawford and Paglen's *Training Humans*¹³ foreground the politics of datasets, revealing the racialized, gendered, and historically situated biases embedded within AI systems. Latour's argument that critique must reengage with the material conditions of technological infrastructures¹⁴ resonates strongly with such approaches. Yuk Hui's exploration of digital objects¹⁵ and Steyerl's reflections on the saturation of digital images¹⁶ both suggest that curatorial practice must address not only the outputs but the systemic operations that generate them. Stiegler's theory of technical individuation¹⁷ highlights the temporality of computational processes, while Erin Manning's minor gesture¹⁸ and Hennion's sociology of attachments¹⁹ provide methodological tools for understanding how

spectators, machines, and infrastructures coproduce meaning within AI installations. Lev Manovich's software theory²⁰ further confirms that software not the image has become the principal agent of cultural transformation, and exhibitions must adapt accordingly.

Temporal unpredictability compounds these challenges. AI artworks often evolve in real time, generate unique outputs, or respond to environmental variations, raising complex questions about authorship, preservation, and responsibility. Who owns an artwork that never repeats itself? How does a museum conserve a system that depends on obsolete software or proprietary APIs? Curating AI thus becomes an exercise in sustaining conditions rather than objects, maintaining relations rather than meanings.

The implications extend beyond the museum. AI generated bodies and machinic avatars do not merely disrupt representation; they destabilize the categories of presence, intimacy, and subjectivity that underpin humanist aesthetics. If presence can be simulated, and intimacy can be computationally modulated, then the boundaries of the body are no longer defined by flesh but by processes of modulation, relational attachment, and algorithmic inference. The simulacrum, as Deleuze argues, is not a degraded copy but a positive production: a form of reality that breaks free from hierarchical distinctions between original and replica. AI generated bodies exemplify this logic, producing new ontologies of corporeal possibility.

Ultimately, AI mediated presence demands a fundamental rethinking of how we understand bodies, relations, and aesthetic experience. The virtual body does not replace the human body; it deterritorializes it, redistributing embodiment across computation, interface, and imagination. Intimacy changes not because it becomes artificial, but because it becomes infrastructural woven into feedback systems, datasets, and machinic predictions. To encounter the virtual body is to enter a field where presence is multiple, machinic, and affectively charged. The challenge for contemporary art and curating is not to defend the boundaries of the human but to think with and through machinic presences, developing new conceptual and ethical frameworks capable of engaging the multiplicity of posthuman becomings.

Notes:

- 1) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- 2) Rosi Braidotti, 2013, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity).
- 3) N. Katherine Hayles, 1999, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- 4) Franco "Bifo" Berardi, 2015, *And: Phenomenology of the End* (London: Verso).
- 5) Félix Guattari, 1995, *Chaosmosis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- 6) Mark B.N. Hansen, 2006, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (London: Routledge).
- 7) Donna Haraway, 1991, "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge): 149–181.
- 8) Brian Massumi, 2002, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- 9) Memo Akten, 2018, "Learning to See" (artist statement).
- 10) Refik Anadol, 2021, "Machine Hallucinations" (artist statement).
- 11) Lu Yang, 2020, "DOKU: Digital Reincarnation" (artist statement).
- 12) Ed Atkins, 2015, "Ribbons," video installation, Serpentine Galleries.
- 13) Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, 2019, "Training Humans" (Fondazione Prada, Milan).
- 14) Bruno Latour, 2004, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225–248.
- 15) Yuk Hui, 2016, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- 16) Hito Steyerl, 2013, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *eflux journal* 49.
- 17) Bernard Stiegler, 2010, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- 18) Erin Manning, 2016, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- 19) Antoine Hennion, 2007, "Those Things That Hold Us Together." *Cultural Sociology* 1(1): 97–114.

20) Lev Manovich, 2013, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury).

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