

# HUMANESIS

sound  
and  
technological  
posthumanism

THE BODY OF THIS BOOK is a critical discourse analysis of three strains of technological posthumanism that emphasizes the cultural–political stakes of each, the way that each instance of humanesis—the putting-into-discourse of the human—directs our understanding of human–technology coupling along different evaluative vectors. This emphasis is lent support by readings of contemporary media artworks that are intended to probe a specific (posthumanist) problematic raised with respect to each theorist and to avow the study’s own unavoidable role in constructing the discourse that it describes. To this end, these artistic analyses are attentive to the medial specificities of the works they consider and give particular emphasis to the role that sound—as introduced at the beginning of this introduction—plays in their relational networks. Taken together, then, technology is at the center of every level of this project: as the forms of selfhood that are exemplified in each strain of technological posthumanism (i.e., technologies of subjectivity); as the material conditions and (often) the aesthetic ground of the media art practices considered; and as the mode in which these considerations are collected into a unified text. Pairing the centripetal force of theoretical close readings with the (imaginary but no less visceral) centrifugal flights of artistic practice, this project introduces a new, procedural understanding of the inductive theoretical knowledge that is already in play at the junction of technology, media art, and subjectivity. In short, this approach attends to the particularities of cultural production in their own right, emphasizing not only the ways that theory is supported by cultural practices but also the ways in which the latter tend to elude theoretical discourse. This understanding not only enhances the theoretical milieu within which this study operates but also transfigures it through a rejuvenated

emphasis on the praxis of meaning-formation in its inductive capacity.<sup>26</sup>

The theoretical content of this book is focused around three thinkers: Ollivier Dyens, N. Katherine Hayles, and Mark B. N. Hansen. Each of these three offers a different inflection to the study at hand, sending it in disparate directions: Dyens's *Metal and Flesh* intensifies Richard Dawkins's logic of "selfish" genetic reproduction in its cultural aspect, articulating the deterministic challenge to human agency implicitly issued by notions of scientific discourse constructed around measurability, repeatability, and falsifiability. Hayles has been a primary figure in the rise to discursive prominence of technological posthumanism, and the trajectory of her thought charts a genealogy of the future of the technological posthuman that registers the specificity of contemporary technologies in their own right. In this respect, Hayles's attempts to think beyond what she perceives to be the limits of deconstruction are read here for the contributions that they offer to the discourse, despite her project ultimately being tethered to the humanist values that she seeks to gain traction against. Finally, Hansen's advocacy for an extralinguistic understanding of embodiment and technics moves against deconstruction from the other side, articulating a fully present body that would precede linguistic ambivalence. Though Hansen's analyses give an important account of how an operational perspective can inform contemporary thinking about couplings of humans and machines, I argue that the conclusions that he draws from this perspective reinforce (rather than undermine) the tenets of Derridean deconstruction.

Similarly, the artworks considered in tandem with these theorists also each offer a unique perspective. The analysis of *Eidola*—an exhibition featuring works by William Brent and Ellen Moffat—teases out the exhibit's challenge to scientific (visual) logic from two sides, showing both that it is haunted by forces that are qualitatively different than those that it registers and that its very signs, pushed to the extreme, turn back on themselves to speak against the terms that conditioned them in the first place. Similarly, the analysis of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *The Trace* reads the telepresence of the piece as demonstrative of the type of complexly contingent agency that Hayles unpacks but also emphasizes (particularly when thought in tandem with Judith Butler's theory of melancholic subjectivity) the ethical ambivalence that obtains in the performative dimension of this situation.

Moreover, since *The Trace* is an exemplary piece of early telepresent art, studying it gives purchase on media art's points of departure from traditional disciplinary practices as well as the ontological assumptions that are built into these practices. Finally, the analysis of Skewed Remote Musical Performance (SRMP)—a collaborative practice between William Brent and me—exemplifies the rich entanglement that Hansen deems characteristic of our present historical moment but also reiterates the extent to which meaning construction remains, even in the context of ubiquitous media, conditioned by linguistic practice. In this context, if Hansen's thought points a digital finger back toward analog subjectivity, SRMP might be said to perform the inverse gesture, insisting on the impossibility of inscribing an originary status to either analog or digital realities.

Chapter 4, "*The Trace: Melancholy and Posthuman Ethics*," mobilizes Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's participatory telepresent installation *The Trace* in relation to the call for an embodied understanding of information pronounced in Hayles's technological posthumanism. In particular, this problematic is taken up by reading *The Trace* with and against Judith Butler's account of melancholic subjectivity, specifically as it is articulated in *Antigone's Claim*.<sup>37</sup> Through this lens, I argue that the subjectivity performed in *The Trace* unilaterally reduces the participants' modes of relating to one another. However, rather than either authoring a dematerialized body or evincing a priority of embodiment, this reduction allows the piece to function as a critique of the unilateral narratives that it performs and also of the symbolic form of relation itself as it obtains in Butler. As a result, *The Trace* exists in a tension with both vectors of (de)materialization that, ultimately, positions their relation as the terrain of its posthumanist ethics. In turn, this poses a significant challenge to Hayles's (foundational) attachment to the possibility of nonhegemonic meaning, reemphasizing the containment of her thought in a language of value.

## 4 *THE TRACE: MELANCHOLY AND POSTHUMAN ETHICS*

The production of the *unsymbolizable*, the *unspeakable*, the *illegible* is also always a strategy of social abjection.

JUDITH BUTLER, *BODIES THAT MATTER*

The year 1995: it was a time of flesh, it was a time of data. It was a virtual time, really, in the full sense of the term, that is, in the sense that data bodies were seen circulating freely, but their visibility as such attested to an explicit awareness that something was not circulating. Isn't this the story of virtual reality? That every dematerializing claim that it makes is simultaneously a demonstration of the necessity of making such a claim, a demonstration that precisely the opposite is also true? We encounter Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *The Trace*, then, as volume 1 of "The History of *Virtuality*, echoing Foucault in a time when the unflagging claims of the flesh's "disappearance" into digitality spoke equally to a relentless normative reiteration of a historically specific version of the human body. *The Trace*, then, is read here neither as the author of a dematerialized body nor as evidence of embodiment's continued relevance (à la Hayles). Instead, *The Trace* unilaterally reduces its participants' modes of relating to one another, but this reduction in turn performs a critique of both vectors of (de)materialization and, ultimately, positions their relation as the terrain of its posthuman ethics.

*The Trace: Remote Insinuated Presence* consists of a telepresent installation that invites two participants in remote sites to share the same telematic space.<sup>1</sup> The piece features two stations (which can be in the same building or in different cities), each of which consists of a dark room with a giant rear-projection screen on the ceiling, a side monitor, four robot lamps hanging from the ceiling, and ten loudspeakers distributed around the room's perimeter. On entering the station, each participant is given a small wireless sensor that monitors her three-dimensional position. *The Trace* transfers the sensor's coordinates between the remote stations so that each sensor controls audiovisual elements in both stations.

*The Trace* insinuates the remote participant's presence in the local station in four ways, first, via four mechanized robot lamps that hang from the ceiling, each emitting a narrow beam of light (two beams are yellow and two are blue). The blue beams point to the local participant, whereas the yellow beams intersect at the position of the remote participant (fog machines are used to accentuate the beams). Second, three-dimensional graphic animations of a ring and disc are projected onto a large ceiling screen, with the ring tracking the movements of the local participant and the disc following the remote participant's movements. Third, the remote participant is rendered locally through quantitative data presented as a statistics screen on a CRT monitor. Finally, a perimeter of loudspeakers articulates sounds that are spatialized relative to the position of the remote participant. In addition, the sound volume is adjusted in direct relation to the distance separating the participants, whose proximity to one another is also reflected in the content of the sound itself. Specifically, the distance is quantified in meters, with a prerecorded voice speaking the distance triggered appropriately (e.g., when the two participants are one and a half meters apart, a voice speaks "one point five meters").

In the context of mid-1990s digital art, the multisensory aspect of this work is notable because it offers a multiply embodied telepresence. In this, the work resists the visual domination that, for example, characterized early video games, which were typically configured around the represented movements of an avatar (i.e., nonvisual media were typically put in service of the visual narrative rather than considered in their own right). Instead, *The Trace* works not only in multiple media (i.e., sonic, visual, and locative)<sup>2</sup> but also in multiple registers within each medium. Thus, for example, participants have simultaneous locative experiences in the two-dimensional world of statistics, the three-dimensional world of the robot lamps, and the simulated three-dimensional world of the projected graphics. Through the interactions within each medium, then, an internal complexity is produced that, in turn, renders the participants' movements with a degree of specificity—a physics of sorts—that was not available in contemporaneous computer games.<sup>3</sup>

However, in comparison to contemporary telepresent technologies, *The Trace* could nonetheless be read as perpetuating precisely the dematerializing narratives that N. Katherine Hayles critiques so thoroughly.

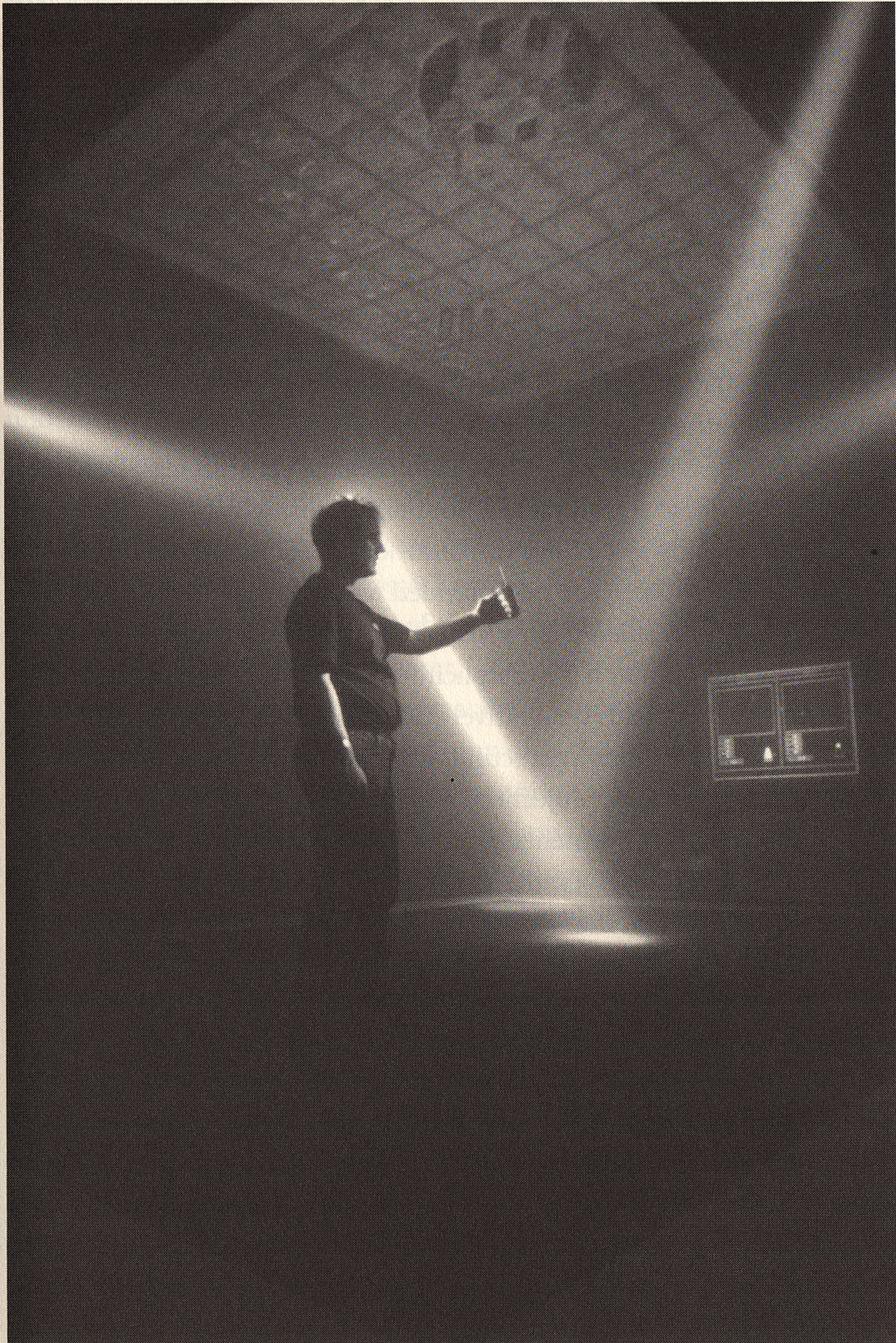


FIGURE 4. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Will Bauer, *The Trace, Remote Insinuated Presence* (Collection Fundación Telefónica, Madrid, Spain), 1995. Photograph by Antimodular.

Certainly the piece is not realistically immersive to the extent that today's technologies allow, which is to say that the parameters for translating the participants' actions into quantifiable data do not approach the level of sophistication required to make the translative process "disappear." Put differently, the participants are computed by the piece rather than existing in a fluid exchange with it, such that—from a basic technical perspective—the aesthetic interest of the environment consists primarily in clarifying the visitor–system correlation. In short, *The Trace's* immersion does not possess the continuity that is necessary for a digital environment to be "believable" so that its status—in this understanding—remains objectively figured (i.e., rather than existing as an interface).<sup>4</sup>

This line of critique seems disingenuous, though, not least because it suggests the type of unilateral technophilia against which *The Trace* is motivated, particularly since Lozano-Hemmer is clear that the multisensory conditions of the piece are not intended to work toward a realistic representation of embodied reality. Instead, the crucial aspect of the piece's multisensoriality is that it is multiplicitous: the logic of the various representational media yields qualitatively different representations that each act within separate—but interacting—virtual architectures. Thus, for example, while the graphic projections and locational sound each correspond to the participants' movements, there is little relation between the actual representations themselves: the graphic moves over a two-dimensional space (the ceiling) that is at a distance to the participants, and its depth is articulated through simulated shadows, whereas (by contrast) the sound immerses the participants by filling the whole room and registers their location through sites of intensity. Thus, whereas the graphic absents a given position when it moves to another, the sound is ubiquitously present as a composite of relative intensities.<sup>5</sup> This difference not only suggests a qualitative difference between the two media but also highlights the use of different interpolation ratios—and thus the creation of differently "sized" virtual spaces—both between media and between spaces.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these differences, the interpolative process is foregrounded over its results.

This has two distinct effects: first, because a single data source (i.e., each participant's tracking location) is translated across multiple media, the medial fungibility of digital data is emphasized. Second, because these media are continually returned to the participants as their own embodied



experience—that is, because the media are the participants’ embodiment in the context of the piece—the gaps over which data’s “a-mediality” sutures are made visceral in a way that could not occur if only a single medium were in play.<sup>7</sup> The multisensory aspect of the piece, then, introduces a reflexive quality to the telepresence experience, wherein the representational media point the participants’ senses back to themselves: they foreground the “complementarity between informational environment and disembodied embodiment.”<sup>8</sup> *The Trace*’s telepresence experience is not so much one of extending the body within conventional parameters, then, as it is one of reconsidering the ontological presuppositions that underwrite these conventions in the first place.

Nowhere is this more evident than in *The Trace*’s sound, which literally gives voice to the mediating agency of the piece. That is, the (tele)presence of a speaking voice suggests a machinic agency because it articulates the mediated distance (or *teledistance*) between the two participants from a perspective that can only be that of the computer: the spoken distances—“one-point-five meters,” “one meter,” and so on—only exist in the computer’s topology. In this way, the machinic agency of the voice sutures the opposition that is found in the immediate content of the sound: on one hand, environmental sounds are ever present and register the remote participant’s movements through continuous dynamic panning; on the other hand, the text is spoken in discrete intervals and offers measurable content. By lending a material presence to the machine, then, the voice (rather than the text it speaks) suggests that this opposition is itself grounded in a relational mechanism. Simply put, the opposition (between discrete and continuous sound) exists as an opposition only within the context of a preexisting field of mediation.

In this way, the disjunctions between and within media highlight the role of representation in the piece, which functions to disarticulate each participant’s body from itself. Thus, if the entangled multimedia rendering of the participants reveals the reduction–addition that Hayles finds in all media translation, it also—more importantly—suggests that the participants’ bodies are no longer unified sources of technological extension but are rather implicated in complex medial relations that both exceed and interpellate them. Simply put, the participants are not able to control their actions—or, perhaps more truthfully, they are no longer able to maintain

the illusion of control—because the technology in *The Trace* renders each seemingly discrete action as a multiplicity of incompatible actions.<sup>9</sup> The participants' disjunctive digital embodiment does not point to their flesh bodies as the "final instance" of their selves, then, but instead registers the multiplicity of their (nonetheless constrained) agency.

The centrality of agency—as a problematic—to *The Trace* is evidenced in Lozano-Hemmer's characterization of it as an experiment in "virtual lebensraum," a test of whether "the physical distance we are expected to keep from other people is upheld within telematic systems."<sup>10</sup> The artist's objective in the work is to allow the participants the possibility of tele-embodiment, which is to say, the possibility of occupying "identical positions in telematic space to the point where they are inside each other."<sup>11</sup> This goal is signaled by the effects that are triggered when tele-embodiment occurs, which include dramatic movements of the robot lamps, an animation in the projected graphics, and flooding of the space with sound (where "flooding" is executed by increasing the intensity of the sound while simultaneously decreasing the differences in intensity between the individual sound channels).

In a sense, then, *The Trace* folds data back into the regime of desire that has often dominated subjective discourse and questions of agency. That is, the individual participants' agency that was disinvested by the piece's multisensoriality is reinvested in their (desiring) telematic relation to one another.<sup>12</sup> *The Trace* does not so much dematerialize the participants' bodies nor extend them beyond the constraints of presence and absence; instead, the piece operates within a paradigm of social agency in which the participants' relations are foregrounded over their embodiments. Simply put, the primary aesthetic territory of the piece is not embodiment but rather an experiment in disembodied ethical consciousness.<sup>13</sup> That is, *The Trace* is not a technological experiment in bodily extension but rather a psychic experiment into the necessary conditions for agency in a telepresent environment. Put differently, *The Trace* tests the experience of distributed agency in its social component.

From this perspective, though, a reduction is nonetheless performed in the piece: rather than dissolving the participants' embodiments into interchangeable and unspecified bits of data, *The Trace* seemingly reduces their mode of relating to a normative unilateral narrative. That is, *The*

*Trace* translates the participants' complex intersubjective relations into a single mode of relating: the desire to tele-embody (or not). Though other actions may—and necessarily do—take place in the space, the conditions of their registration (as agential activities) frame them in relation to this narrative. Moreover, *The Trace's* tele-embodiment narrative not only imposes a unilateral and normative relation but also a teleological one because it marks a clear point of completion in the piece. From this, two points obtain: first, *The Trace's* digital translation of the participants' ethical consciousness is reductive because it is bodily underspecified, in that it does not register those elements of its performance that exceed its dominant narrative (except as excess); second, it is reductive because it is relationally underspecified—the tele-embodiment narrative is a dramatically simplistic account of desire. In short, the work's shift from the territory of embodiment to that of relation displaces the violence of computation that Hayles cites, rather than eliminating it.<sup>14</sup>

My purpose in insisting on the “reductive-ness” of this aspect of *The Trace* is not to criticize the work but rather to highlight the fact that it is demonstrative of a transition from an aesthetics of technical accomplishment to one of a technologically disciplined subject. Read in this way, *The Trace* can be rethought as describing the limits of the discourse of embodiment with respect to distributed agency and its concomitant relational ontology. Put simply, the piece performs an intensification of the problematic of the subject that flips it from being an investigation of the subject's embodiment (a dominant concern of telepresence art in the early 1990s) to one of the ethical relations available to and between (embodied) subjects in the digital environments that intermediate contemporary technoculture. This, as discussed in chapter 3, is precisely Hayles's project. However, as I showed in chapter 3, Hayles employs an a priori set of ethical distinctions to move outward toward an account of digital relations; in contrast, *The Trace* gestures toward the inverse direction, utilizing the relational constraints imposed by its digital environment to suggest a particular ethical project.

SIMPLY PUT, *The Trace* demands a theoretical framework that can connect to both the participants' relations to one another and to the distributed agency and recursive feedback loops of their digital mediation—or, put

differently, a posthumanist approach. I will argue that this framework might productively connect to the constitutive subjective ambivalence that Judith Butler (supplementing Foucault and Lacan) has theorized under the rubric of power, because many of the issues that *The Trace* raises in a digital context are taken up by Butler in their analog aspect. Taking account of how paradox structures the debate of subjectivity—always culminating “in displays of ambivalence”<sup>15</sup>—Butler’s account offers a model from which to address the constitutive ambivalence of binary code, suggesting that code’s very constraints might productively perform a critique of the unilateral narratives that structure it.

In this respect, Butler’s rethinking of Freud merits attention. While Butler agrees with Freud that the mode of desire is always melancholic, she nonetheless argues that the constitutive foreclosure of this melancholia is not that of incest (as Freud argues). Instead, for Butler, homosexual desire is the primary foreclosure in subject formation (existing prior to that of incest) so that the constitutive melancholia of subjectivity is the active absence (or disavowal) of this desire, which in turn attests to the existence of that which is foreclosed. That is, in its very disavowal (in its radical foreclosure), homosexual desire is sustained as a structural necessity in the (always repeating, citational) process of subject formation.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in its most basic formation, the subject is melancholic, and melancholia, in its most basic formation, is properly understood as an “internalization” of the Other. That is, whereas grief represents an externalization of the self into a social field of relationality (through the process of recognizing that a part of oneself has been lost in the loss that is the object of grief), melancholia (as foreclosure) is unable to recognize the object of loss such that loss itself, in its most unknowable dimension, is taken in as the subject. In this sense, the subject is always a radically ambiguous composition of self and Other, just as the porous boundaries of the social are always penetrated by (and penetrate) those of the individual. In a basic equation, then, the ambiguity of the subject and the relationality of the social are correlative for Butler, and their mode of relation is that of vulnerability (because the intelligibility of each is at the mercy of the other).

From this, Butler’s political wager lies in the belief that to think of melancholic subjectivity as deeply embedded (in and as us) is to open the possibility of positivizing the aporetic ambiguity of our subjectivity in the

form of political agency. That is, Butler does not think of agency as the expression of an agential subject but rather considers it as the mode of avowing a relation of vulnerability that is constitutive of agency. And isn't this precisely the scenario that is implicit in Hayles's construal of posthumanism, where no a priori individuation of wills is possible?<sup>17</sup> What Butler articulates, then, is the necessity of rejecting notions of subjectivity that reference preexisting identities in favor of those that operate a perpetual and socially contextualized process of identity formation.

To this end, Butler positions unilateral narratives of political dominance as treatable symptoms of melancholic subjectivity. In contemporary North American political culture, for example, she argues that melancholia has tended to give rise to narratives that foreclose the possibility of grieving certain human lives.<sup>18</sup> In response to this melancholia, grieving is an attempt to suture the gap of ambiguity that is constitutive of our subjectivity; though never entirely successful, this attempt opens (for Butler) the possibility of an ethical political agency. In short, although we can never fully avow the lost object of homosexual desire (which would be to obliterate our subjectivity), the ethical-political agency opened through the concept of ambiguous, ambivalent, and vulnerable relation traverses the fantasy (in Žižek's sense) of an agency composed of unilateral narratives.

This is precisely the line of critique that Butler levels at Lacan in *Antigone's Claim*, the central argument of which is that, in addition to functioning to prohibit sexual exchange among kin relations, the incest taboo "has also been mobilized to *establish* certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones."<sup>19</sup> That is, even when it is only operative as a normative structure, a unilateral narrative of kinship—which, according to Butler, underwrites Lacan's thought—carries within itself its own menace. Specifically, this menace is implicit in the deviation that is constitutive of the reiteration of the Law that is necessary for kinship's structural operation. For Butler, then, the question is what this unilateral narrative of kinship forecloses, a question that she answers with a series of further questions pertaining to the contemporary status of structural figures of kinship.<sup>20</sup>

Butler's elaboration of this implicit menace of deviation recalls Derrida, whose famous critique of structure through the notion of supplementarity includes the argument that repetition always requires deviation.

This connection to Derrida is important here because Butler's analysis might be criticized for a lack of clarity with respect to what the criteria are for deeming a "structure" structural. That is, at what point does a narrative figure become a necessary site of deconstructive analysis? In this line, while Butler convincingly critiques Lacan for positing the heterosexual family as a unilateral narrative of kinship, could not the same criticism be leveled at the forms of sexuality, gender, and desire as they are found in Butler?<sup>21</sup> Although it is clear that Butler thinks of these categories in the most fluid terms possible, they remain—in a categorical sense—uniformly and unilaterally operative, which is really just to reappropriate Butler's interrogation of Lacan to ask, if gender, sexuality, and desire always allow for multiple definitions of themselves, where is this multiplicity (intelligibly) registered, and what sorts of meaning does the normative matrix of this site itself foreclose?

This is not to oversimplify Butler's position: to a certain extent, this line of critique is exactly what she aims to address through her emphasis on ambivalence.<sup>22</sup> Because Butler's subject is always in flux, its menace—paradoxically—both conditions and threatens it. To return to *The Trace*, then, we might say that the piece as such consists in performing this ambivalent flux: the participants' activities are not so much acts of "self-expression" as they are testaments to the ambivalence of *The Trace's*—and, more generally, virtual reality's—codes of interaction. In this, the piece constructs an ethical model through which the participants' intelligibility is revealed to be vulnerable, both to one another and to the way that desire is constructed in and by the piece.<sup>23</sup> It isn't just that the parameters of the piece normatively limit how the participants relate to one another; in addition, the piece itself is dependent on the excesses of the participants' flesh: the piece doesn't really make sense *as a piece* without the push-and-pull ambivalence of this codependence. The explicit process of normative reduction that *The Trace* performs is just as integral to the piece as the unilateral narrative of desire that this reduction produces.

In sum, two dynamics are at work in *The Trace*, and it is crucial to disarticulate them: on one hand, the participants' interactions, and on the other, how the piece, from a quite different vantage, stages those interactions.<sup>24</sup> That is, *The Trace* registers the ambivalence of digitality's claim to media convergence—of the process through which information becomes

disembodied—by always simultaneously signifying the opposite of what is claimed: the participants act virtually within a reductive teleology of (simplistic) desire, for example, but this multimedia convergence also registers as a multitude of disjunctions in their flesh-world bodies (because they can't remain in control of all the various media). This is not to say that *The Trace* is somehow proof positive of Butler's account of melancholic subjectivity but rather that the subjective ambivalence performed in the piece means that the territory on which *The Trace* registers itself, makes itself intelligible *as a piece*, is that of Butler's melancholic subject. In registering ambivalence as its ground, then, *The Trace* suggests an ethics of ambivalence, which is to say that it suggests ambivalence—in this case, figured as active deferment—as a ground for agential activities.

Indeed, this ambivalence is also registered in the boundaries of *The Trace*: while the piece proper exists within the two digital stations, it also spills beyond this containment through the way that it negotiates the participants' entrance. Specifically, while prospective participants wait in line, often for quite a long time, they are able to view monitors showing the current participants as well as their statistical data. In this, the participants' subjective experience within the piece is also an objective experience for those who are waiting: because every participant must wait in line before entering, this objectification of the piece's digital reality penetrates the subjective experience of it while it is taking place. Of equal importance to the monitors, then, is that the line to enter the piece institutes a social scene prior to (and after) that of the participants' immersion. If *The Trace* is an experiment in relation, this waiting area acts as a liminal space between flesh reality and the piece's virtually extended reality. In turn, this suggests that the piece requires a boundary to articulate its version of virtual reality but simultaneously deconstructs this boundary through the interpenetration of subjective and objective experience that it occasions. In this sense, *The Trace* sits precariously on the point "where technologically mediated relations become . . . social relations."<sup>25</sup>

This immediately brings to mind an objection: doesn't reading the piece in this way neglect the fact that the participants have chosen to participate in the first place? That is, can a participatory artwork really be considered a valid testing ground for theories of subjectivity, or is this possibility precluded by the participants having had the option of not



FIGURE 5. Prospective participants line up before entering *The Trace* in Montreal. Photograph by Antimodular.

entering the piece in the first place? This is a valid argument but one that points equally back to the account of agency offered by Butler. That is, meaning itself remains structural in Butler, even as particular meanings are revealed to be contingent. Put differently, a certain conflation of reason and cognition remains the condition of possibility for registering Butler's critique,<sup>26</sup> which is really just to insist on a basic point: the moment that the possibility of positively advocating for an ethics (even one of ambivalence) emerges is, and will always be, simultaneously the moment that the menace that is internal to meaning also emerges. That is, the emergence of ethics is the ultimately arbitrary constitution of a restricted perspectival field, where the premises and consequences of an action are calculable to precisely the extent that they are meaningful: if meaning is present, then it is part of a normative operation. The question that pertains to *The Trace*, then, is whether it succeeds (alongside Butler) in performing ambivalence in its radical character as the end of determination. The answer to this question is not clear, which is to say that Butler's ethics of ambivalence, which is presented here as the ethics of *The Trace*, is itself ambivalent. The answer to the question is a field of other questions.



THE “FIELD OF OTHER QUESTIONS” that emerges in Butler points to a broader critique of her argument that will ultimately lead our discussion more securely back to *The Trace*. Specifically, consider Butler’s substitution, in Freud’s schema, of the foreclosure of homosexual desire for the incest prohibition. When Butler notes, in a footnote, that “presumably, sexuality must [also] be trained away from things, animals, . . . and narcissistic attachments of various kinds,”<sup>27</sup> we can understand that “homosexual” functions in her writing as a sort of stand-in for the field of desire itself: it isn’t just homosexual desire that is foreclosed by the incest prohibition but all nonhetero (and indeed nonhuman) desiring. Paradoxically, then, to register desire is to institute a narrative that forecloses desiring, because the latter cannot be indexed to anything outside of itself. As a result, the lost *object* of Freudian melancholy (and the Lacanian subject) is replaced—in Butler’s schema—not by a lost object of homosexual desire (as she usually claims) but by a lost *relationality* (or “relational field”) of desire.

Again, it bears emphasis that this critique is simply a heightening of precisely what Butler is arguing: the shift from lost object to lost field that I am identifying can be understood as the shift from a subjectivity that operates relatively autonomously and in relation to the established norms of kinship to the radically relational subjectivity that Butler advocates and that has here been claimed as what is performed in *The Trace*. That is, in line with Butler, we might say that a shift from lost object to lost field signifies a transition from thinking desire as a problematic of the subject’s relation to the social (where the two categories are distinct, but related) to thinking it as a mode of action, the *effect* of which is the (always repeating and thus changing) constitution of the subject and the social, of the performer and the performance. In this latter figuration, then, desire is not a force that seeks to establish relations but is rather the relations themselves understood as ongoing events (i.e., as desiring).

Thus the shift from object to field points to a further ambiguity in Butler’s writing: if desire articulates the conditions for intersubjective relations, then does it not also act as a Law that conditions the operation of normativity? That is, just as a logic of sense conditions the registration of meaning, does it not also structure desire? If this is the case, then it follows that the normative force of Law does not spring from primal kinship relations but rather from a value-form of desire.<sup>28</sup> That is, desire

is predicated—paradoxically—on its own foreclosure, on a meaning that both grounds it and follows from it.

The question, then, is to what extent desire remains an active force of ethical agency (which Butler's characterization of melancholy requires it to be) if it is always-already also the normative Law that it opposes. That is, does Butler's emphasis on the constitutive deviation of repetition (with respect to normative discourse) still hold if the Law and its deviating repetition both remain constrained by an injunction to mean? Put differently, does Butler succeed in articulating a form of desiring that does not relate to a determined form of desire? To a value of desire (in Nietzsche's sense)? Or, thought from the other direction, does this perspective offer a model of agency that ultimately has no way of registering itself as such? Obviously, this is a line of questioning that is not entirely unattended in Butler, but it is also not resolved; the question remains as to whether Butler's ambivalence is the radical potential for agency that she hopes it is or whether it is simply the ambivalence of a construction of meaning that is relentlessly haunted by meaninglessness. By performing this problematic, *The Trace* puts forth these questions—as questions—as an ethics of the hypermediated relations and distributed causalities that characterize Hayles's humanist construction of technological posthumanism. That is, rather than presuming an ethical framework for its performance of technological posthumanism, the "content" of *The Trace's* performance is precisely—and paradoxically—a contestation of this context.

FROM HERE, we might understand *The Trace* as a piece that ambivalently performs the "turn" that Butler identifies as a condition of the subject's social intelligibility.<sup>29</sup> However, the multisensory telepresence of *The Trace's* participants—achieved through the characteristic simultaneity of digital technology—renders this performance in a way that calls the "condition-ness" of this constraint into question. That is, while the (apparent) content of *The Trace* is clearly a reduction of the participants' subjective ambivalence, the way that this reduction is acted performs a critique of unilateral narratives of relation and of the symbolic form of relation itself.

In this respect, *The Trace* concretely demonstrates the more general challenge that digital telepresence presents to ethical schemes grounded in anthropocentric constructions of relationality. As Virilio famously noted

when the technology was still in its relatively nascent stage, by generating a perspective from beyond the limitations of customary conceptions of proximity, telepresence

disposes of the very notion . . . of touch . . . [to seriously upset] not only the distinction between “actual” and “virtual” . . . [but also] the very reality of near and far, thus questioning our own presence here and now . . . [and seriously affecting] the conditions of necessity for direct sensual sensory experience.<sup>30</sup>

If conventional notions of “touch” are thus obsolesced, *The Trace* reminds us of McLuhan’s claim that precisely such obsolescence is “the cradle of art,”<sup>31</sup> which is to say, an important condition for probing a future where tactility and relationality are not the exclusive and de facto province of an uninterrogated and categorical “human.”

All of this leads us back to Hayles’s *nisus* for a posthuman ethics. Listening to Butler, *The Trace* suggests a posthuman that is constrained by meaning into a doubled relation with ethics: on one hand, *The Trace* simply reiterates the paradoxical human subjectivities that Butler identifies; on the other hand, though, in staging this paradox as a medial disjunction, *The Trace* suggests technological posthumanism as a process in which meaning is superseded by relation. In the first instance, ethics enters the scene (alongside Hayles) as a corrective to the dematerializing tendencies of computation but is thereby positioned beyond the pale of posthuman discourse. In the second case, the very possibility of a posthuman ethics is contested, but in this contestation, an opportunity is opened to specify what exactly ethics might consist of in our present—hypermediated—historical moment. In the ambivalent relation of the two approaches, then, is the ethical problematic that *The Trace* performs so that—ultimately—we might say that *The Trace*’s wager lies in the performative repetition that sustains this *crux as crux*, thereby maintaining its active relation to ambiguity. Put differently, *The Trace* opens a paradoxical space in which posthuman ethics might be thought (and performed), insisting on the undecidability of any particular schematic of posthuman ethics, while simultaneously demonstrating that we—as posthumans—nonetheless continuously decide.

- Hansen differentiates between the body image and the body schema, a point that is elaborated later.
- 98 Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 5.
- 99 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 100 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 101 This aligns with the reading of Rafael-Lozano Hemmer's *The Trace* that I presented in chapter 4. From Hansen's perspective, we might add that the bodily reduction of telepresent works such as *The Trace* newly reveals viscosity in that the redundancy of the term (what, after all, would fail to be visceral?) is no longer supplemental (in the conventional—rather than Derridean—sense) but is now instead detached from a generalized experience of embodiment to be perceptible in its own right.