Seeing Yourself Strangely:  
Media Mirroring and The Third Eye Project

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Abstract. There is a long history of technologies and techniques that seek to make the body strange through its mediated self-perception. Artworks that mirror the body through electronic media have often done so at points of disjuncture or distortion. Traditionally, such artworks have been interpreted as enframing or narcissistic gestures. However, it does not necessarily follow that this bodily strangeness is inherently negative, or even new. Recent research concerning phenomenology, cognitive science and philosophies of technology stand to contest this problematically hermetic approach to self-perception. Instead of presuming the pre-existence of a coherent body that is fragmented by technology, self-perception might be better understood as a cognitive act that is always already incomplete and technological. The nature and ethics of this mediated self-perception and its concomitant exploration of technological supports are the subjects of this paper, explored through the case study of Takehito Etani’s The Third Eye Project.

1 Art, Electronic Media, and Self-Perception

Seeing yourself strangely has long been seen as a destabilizing affair. A disquieting virtuality haunts our self-perception through technologies such as VR and digital video. Looking at ourselves through technology also seems to run the risk of cyborgic transformation—of bodies made alien or broken through the inorganic logic of visual media. It is out of a concern for the body and its social and epistemological importance that visual technologies of self-mirroring have been decried. Such perspectives, however, are arguably driven by a fear for the loss of a body that may have never existed in practice. An interrogation of the lived experience of embodiment, with its undisclosed techniques, propensities and supports, can intervene on these narratives, proposing new ways of accounting for the intersections between art, technology, and self-perception.

As suggested by a short appraisal of the history of video art, anxieties about virtual and technological bodies have clearly played a part in shaping the tenor of how electronic art has been interpreted. Much of this canon is figured in terms of a critique of the medium’s tendency to alienate the figures it seeks to represent. Richard Serra’s Boomerang (1974) with its auditory aphasia, for example, has been alternatively described as a “prison” [1, p.53] or a “toxic media overdose” [2, p.75]. Similarly, Bruce Nauman’s Live-Taped Video Corridor (1970), with its claustrophobic embodiment and retreating self-image, has been summarized as an “oppressive concept that is at the expense of the viewer” [3, p.24]. Perhaps most tellingly, Nam June Paik’s TV Buddha (1974) is usually read as the dearth of spiritual possibility—an ironic and biting commentary on the excessive reach of telecommunications media
If any form of embodiment is recognized in such works, it is more often assumed to be disabled by the media that support and construct these bodies. Key to these ideas about electronic media is the presumed coherency of the perceiver who exists before representation—typically a body free of the virtual and technological conditions that are so effectively foregrounded in video. However, this appeal to a bodily integrity that precedes mediation is not supported by recent advances in the fields of cognitive science, phenomenology, and the philosophy of technology. As these emerging perspectives suggest, embodied experience can be better understood as continuously incomplete, enactive, and contingent upon technological supports and extensions to the body’s sensory world. It can thus be argued that video art and other forms of mediated self-perception, by consequence, do not so much alienate their viewers as expose the ongoing condition of their inherently fragmentary means of self-perception.

This perspective stands to significantly shift appraisals of self-perceptive media both old and new. Explored through an analysis of Takehito Etani’s *The Third Eye Project* (2002), it will be suggested that the virtual and technological disquiet of self-perception can be a profoundly productive condition. When the techniques of self-perception do not smooth out our own embodied strangeness, a more vivid portrait of the virtual and technological body can be reflected.

### 2 The Third Eye Project

*The Third Eye Project* presents an intriguing experience of estranged self-perception. Donning the artist’s device, the user’s visual and corporeal understanding is profoundly altered. A pair of goggles blind one eye while exposing the other to a two-inch LCD monitor, held close enough to the eye-piece as to bracket out all other visual sensation. This screen is wired to a small, black and white surveillance camera, mounted above and behind the user’s shoulders and cantilevered from bands of latex tubing wrapped around the user’s head. What the user then experiences, through their monocular screen, is a live feed of their own back from an elevated, third-person perspective.
The technological contrivance of this headgear could suggest a certain sense of alien futurity. Combined with the shaved head and white lab jacket Etani wears during performances of the piece (Fig. 1), *The Third Eye Project*’s outwards affectation appears to gesture towards an aesthetic of cyberpunk, the artworks of Stelarc and the techno-fetishistic cyborgs of science fiction. Peering into the device’s screen, moreover, this sense of alienation is deepened. The familiar comforts of binocular, colour and frontal vision are replaced by the comparatively impoverished greys and grain of the video feed (Fig. 2). Estranged from human sight, this form of virtual self-surveillance seems at reify the familiar narrative of technology as a dominating force outside of and antagonistic to the human. Yet—however respondent to common cultural fears this reading may be, such a conception of the body proves to be the very perspective that a more nuanced understanding of the piece stands to contest.

3 Virtual Bodies

Part of the shock of wearing Etani’s device is the degree to which one’s body becomes dramatically virtualized. Rather than situating vision within the body, *The Third Eye Project* shifts this site outside of its habitual envelope to a third-person perspective, mimicking the popular camera angles of video game avatars. This virtual image of a strange body to be piloted through space from some remove seems to weaken the user’s connection between sight and a secure sense of materiality. In humanities scholarship at large, a great deal of hopes and anxieties have been raised on the subject of virtualized bodies, particularly around the figure of the cyborg [6], [7], [8]. However, as many contemporary cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind seek to prove, the virtual can be better understood outside of science-fiction and instead as a mundane function of human perception, ever-present in even the most technologically bare forms of embodiment.

Key to this perspective is an acknowledgement of the cognitive gaps and compensations that occur outside of our conscious apprehension. An examination of the physical limitations of the body’s sensory organs reveals that sensory information is inherently fragmentary. Whether through blind spots, selective attention, or saccadic gaps, the paucity of the collected sensory data of the body contrasts with the richness of conscious experiences of perception. Consequently, cognitive scientists
and philosophers have argued that our everyday ease and coherence in perception is an illusion—the result of active guesswork by various cognitive processes [9], [109], [11], [12]. This is to say, the perceived world is pitted with gaps later to be smoothed over with a supplementary virtuality.

An example of this argument can be found in the work of Alva Noë, a professor of both philosophy and cognitive science [9]. In his account of the perception of partially occluded objects Noë argues that the unseen aspects of objects are nevertheless present through our skill-based access to them [9, p.67]. By virtue of actively moving around objects one forms habitual conceptions of their holistic, sensory characteristics, described by Noë as a “sensorimotor profile” [9, p.78]. As objects are never fully and simultaneously disclosed, perceivers must navigate speculatively, relying on the learned contingencies of perception to fill in one’s sensorial gaps as required. Perception, he argues, is thus profoundly virtual—a half-fiction that is constantly fact-checked against the perceiver’s environment [9, p.52].

This rather mundane arena of experience takes on a more radical dimension when applied to the nuances of colour and detail in the visual field. As Noë explains, one’s range of optical focus and clarity is unexpectedly small due to a poverty of sensory data from the periphery and the blind-spots of the eye. As a result, much of the visual field is more virtually present that materially mimetic [9, p.128]. No matter how close, consistent or focused the visual field may be, the atomicity of perceptual information is always lost to the holistic, virtually-enacted environment. This leads Noë to contend, “[t]he content of experience is virtual all the way in” [9, p.134].

This concept of the virtual as inherent to the phenomenology of perception, yet also somewhat undisclosed by its role in the unacknowledged dimensions of visual fields, suggests that Etani’s work may reveal a strangeness that was always already there. The back of one’s head, never directly perceived through the frontality of human vision, is nevertheless virtually rendered by a perceiver’s sensorimotor profile of other human forms. Etani’s device, therefore, merely virtualizes what already exists as virtual content: a part of the body that is absent from normal optical access to one’s own form granted by the forward orientation of the eyes.

Consonant with the virtual and mediated nature of all perceptions of the self, The Third Eye Project does not render the back with particular clarity or unbroken ease. Instead, the visually grainy and staccato nature of the feed draws attention to the mediation of the image, refusing to bring the image into an illusory fidelity that might disguise the fragmented and active way in which we see. The technological stamp of the image, with its granularity and visual artifacts, can also follow a similar turn of argument. After all, there can be no direct or ‘natural’ way to view one’s own back; this part of the body must by necessity always be mediated, whether through mirrors, photographs or video. The camera thus poised might be more readily understood as a technology of perceptual introspection rather than one of domination and dehumanization.

These two forms of deferred presence—that of the technologically-mediated image and that the sensorimotor imaginary—might be productively coalesced into a continuous category of virtualization. This is not to say, however, that the departure from biological to technological forms of perception presents an inconsequential shift, but rather that this externalization is a secondary process of an existent mechanic.

4 Technological Ethics

Normalizing virtuality, however, does not exhaust the critiques of mediated self-perception, nor the content of The Third Eye Project. Several factors in the work alert
the viewer to an undervanent of biotechnology, from the naked circuit board of the headset to the white laboratory coat. The goggle’s blinding eye piece, moreover, has a disparately organic shape and a bone-like colour and texture (Fig. 3). In a continuum from flesh to machine, wires and electronics are mediated into the body via translucent straps and tubing, bridging the technological and biological.

Fig. 3. Takehito Etani. *The Third Eye Project*. Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

The artist himself describes the work’s aesthetic in terms techno-tribalism [13]. While referencing the imagined figure of the cyborg of the future, Etani also attempts to reach back to theprehistoric origin of tool use in his appropriation and mimicry of natural materials. In a somewhat shamanistic gesture the device was built to resemble a bird skull, echoing bone and sinew and punning on the notion of the ‘bird’s-eye-view’ offered by the camera [13]. Technology thus figured suggests a rather more complicated trajectory than one of pure futuristic speculation. Instead, Etani’s gesture is one of a return, reversing the forward-looking gaze to encircle the whole of the human-technological relationship and its role in self-perception.

The complicated origin of technology and the specter of its dehumanizing possibilities certainly pre-date contemporary anxieties of the virtual or the cyborg. Martin Heidegger, most famously, outlined the dual root of technology as a means of both revealing and enframing the natural in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” [14]. In this work his somewhat nostalgic privileging of the craftsmanship of the past is contrasted against the technological industry of the modern period seen to so radically shift the essential and natural into an artificial standing-reserve of commodities. By Heidegger’s calculation, this technologically-ordered world with its lack of autonomous objects and natural propensities, risks a dangerous solipsism wherein “man everywhere and always encounters only himself” [14, p.27].

Even this outcome, however, seems charitable when his argument is extended further to include the contemporary ways in which the body is measured as a technological potentiality. One of the predominant fears raised by cybernetics has been that of an attenuation of humanist values and the loss of the bodily integrity of human identifications [15]. As the argument goes, to see oneself as plastic tissues and prosthetic possibilities is to lose sight of the ethics and standpoint of the human condition.

These anxieties about the technological trap of visualizing entities as a standing-reserve also have a history in the visual arts, particularly that of new media. Renowned art critic Rosalind Krauss, in her historic appraisal of video art, describes the medium as inherently narcissistic, engendering an insular, psychoanalytic frame for the user to delight in their own objectified image [1]. Video’s illusory erasure of
the division between subjects and objects, rendered through Krauss’ Lacanian frame, troubles the theorist as it seems poised to deny the materiality of art and its intentionality towards an external audience. Described as an “instrument of double-oppression” that threatens the viewer’s sense of temporality and subjectivity, Krauss situates video as something for artists to expose and exploit [1, pp.58-59]. This Heideggerian paradigm, with its deep suspicion towards the technicity of self-perception, has largely foreclosed alternative appraisals of such media.

Yet, just as self-perception is an inherently virtual act, so too is it by necessity a technological one. One’s sensorimotor profile of the body is learned and iterative, adaptive to multiple techniques and mediations [9]. Through reflections, mirrors, photographs and video, a continuum of technologies support an extant practice of bodily understanding. This ability to imagine and inhabit avatar images of ourselves and others might even be said to lie at the originary point of many cultural technologies. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes, the architectonics of the body and its embeddedness in reciprocal forms of onto-phenomenological space (i.e. ‘the flesh’) form the preconditions for language, the most widely celebrated and humanized of our technological feats [16, p.155]. Mark B. N. Hansen, moreover, inverts and strengthens this claim, arguing that it was tool use’s delocalization of sensation that created the conditions for the “mixed reality” of the flesh’s shared sensorium [17, p.9]. If the phenomenological virtuality of the body is inextricably tied to our use and deployment of technology, then the extent to which technological forms of self-perception are necessarily enframing can be problematized.

In and as far as Heidegger claims that technology enframes, its converse potential to reveal might be further expounded—be it the disclosure of new forms of understanding or faces of truth (aletheia). In an example of such a feat, Heidegger describes the triumph of “things” in contradistinction of mere objects in his account of the four-fold resonance of a jug [18, p.179]. Things, by reflecting and coalescing external qualities, gain a special ontological status quite antithetical to the supposed narcissism of video. This mirroring, rather, is a multidimensional reflection, that encircles the whole of an object and its larger context, displaying its environment in its totality. As Heidegger writes, “[w]hatever becomes a thing occurs out of the ringing of the world’s mirror-play. Only when... world worlds as a world... does the ring shine forth” [18, p.182]. This literary mirroring in his prose further illustrates the point: reflections and mirrors are not inherently narcissistic objects, but may rather act to conjoin disparate components of an external whole. Moreover, if one is to accomplish such a gesture within the limits human sensorium, this perception must by necessity be augmented and mediated through technology.

Philosopher David Wills, in his examination of the wider anxieties precipitated by the humanist critique of biotechnologies, follows Heidegger’s gesture of ringing to situate technology as a dorsal force. Looking at the origin of tool use at the point of bipedal development in human evolution, Wills argues that the erect posture of homo sapiens, with its perceptual inattentiveness to the back, is the origin of technology and its unacknowledged site of enactment [19]. Through the metaphor of ambulation, Wills suggests that the perception of linear progress (i.e. walking in a straight line) is an oversimplification of a technique by which each step forward is rendered through a turn towards the back. It is thus only through a series of opposing turns and over-corrections that the body is propelled forward. The dorsal face, however, remains alien and unseen, leading to a miscategorization of movement and technology as purely frontal. If technology is defined as, per Heideggerian enframing, something external to the human, generative from its capacities but not a part of its body and substance, then the dorsal has been problematically forgotten. With the technological back unaccounted for in our sense of self, Wills notes a lacuna in our humanistic definition, thus “we are not completely human and can never become so” [19, p.62] under such terms. At the heart of the anxieties raised by the cyborg, then, is a fearful
acknowledgement of this internal stranger—this dorsal presence. Just as the flesh is to Merleau-Ponty an “anonymity innate to Myself [sic],” [16, p.139] to Wills, the dorsal is “the unassimilable foreignness of that misrecognized self” [19, p.35]. As with most monsters, we fear in them that which we deny in ourselves.

In this context, The Third Eye Project seems to be a direct gesture towards revisiting and admitting the disquieting coexistence of the technological within the human, though this aspect may not be at first recognizable as such. Seen through technologically-mediated vision, Etani’s user comprehends their own back, forced to see the rear of their head with its technological protrusions (Fig. 2). Their deferred depiction of themselves is presented without its recognizable features. There are no familiar facial traits and, in contradistinction to the learned habit of the mirror, the movement of the right hand is not represented through the inverted left. It is thus a challenge to learn to recognize oneself through the back. In this respect, the dorsal turn of the artwork might create the conditions for a more direct relation with this internal stranger. Turning the frontality of the gaze in on itself by shifting from the internal, subjective body to its own external architecture, The Third Eye Project stages a relation with the self’s own undisclosed supports—the technological Other.

The device thus presents a chance to chart new forms of self-understanding. Engaging with this back-turned form, learning to mobilize it, and make sense of the world from its technologically-augmented perspective, suggests not only a return the disavowed back, but a way of re-inhabiting it. Indeed, users report as much in accounts of their embodied experiences with the device. Pushed slightly beyond of the envelope of their skin, participants report feeling a partial out-of-body experience, floating within and between the camera and their shoulders [13]. Explicitly aware of their identification with their own interfaces, both bodily and digital, the users’ phenomenological extension joins with that of the technological to pass full circle from the frontal to dorsal body.

4 Conclusions

This strange figure leaves this discussion at a curious point of departure. The circuitous path of its mirroring reflects a new kind of portrait of the human as supplemented, full of gaps that are filled by perceptual techniques and mediation. Nevertheless, such a portrait omits less than one that presumes the coherence of a body prior to the actions of the external forces of technology and virtuality. By returning this critique to its internal source within the human, it may be possible to gain a deeper sense of responsibility and coextension with the technologies and bodies that incite such fears.

Turning to the back, towards technological and virtual perception, ultimately stands to invite new ethical possibilities. An art and art history of the back—of the gaps in our vision, and of our own disavowed technicity—might provide fertile ground from which to better encounter electronic media and mobilize their potential to mirror that which is undisclosed in our own limited understanding of our bodies. Thus, as the reflections on the visuality and the bodily turn of The Third Eye Project suggest, fears of dehumanization and narcissism may actually inhibit an introspective appraisal of our virtual and technological propensities. Seeing the body made strange, it may be suggested, can be a means of self-understanding rather than solipsism, of reflection rather than enframement.
References