

The Artist as Virus:

The Exploitation of Popularizing Media as Readymade Conduit for Communication

An Exhibition Catalogue

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Behavioral Image

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Technology changes across generations, but humans continue to communicate. When society began to communicate via airwave, that became the landscape that they possessed. These artists exploit the resource of popular media and its developed social language as *tools*. Since these media platforms are standardized as methods for communication, when taken advantage of for their afforded properties, the result is an exceptional platform for the artist to broadcast their own political voice. However, in addition, this reflexive act will chronically embody their generation beyond each artist's control, as these new forms of communication encapsulate each era's monumental shift in representation and as such the topical political discourse.

When a new form of popular media is introduced into society, such as television, camcorders, YouTube, and 3D animation, a complex cultural language establishes that dictates how to use and read these technologies, both through syntax and coded language. Media offers culture a conduit for communication. Thus, like any language, it must develop a standardized method, or syntax for use. Consider the nonsensical structure of the 1903 film by Edwin S. Porter, *Life of an American Fireman*¹. The film shows a scene of a woman being saved from a burning house from the interior, then immediately after the exact same scenario shot from outside the house. To a modern viewer, the story is difficult to follow. Cinema is an entertainment media designed to tell stories. A film intending to entertain that leaves the viewer confused is not successfully using the media. Thus, the revolutionary structure of continuity was developed. Had Porter used the technique of crosscutting and showed shots from outside and inside the house intermittently, the film would have had much more narrative logic. Since

¹ Edwin S. Porter and Edwin S. Porter, *Life of an American Fireman* (United States: Edison Mfg. Co., 1903)

cinema, a multitude of media forms with unique purposes have developed through history, several which are highlighted in *The Artist as Virus*. Each developing popular media form its own logical rules native to the constraints of each specific technology in order to develop a unique, legible media language. Additionally, as the popularizing media forms become implemented regularly, learned cultural techniques begin to reflect the generation of their development. Due to their viral nature, these techniques create coded language with highly potent and pithy cultural context, otherwise known as memes.²

For example, as explained in further detail by David Joselit in *Feedback*,³ due to the ability for television to broadcast entertainment nationwide and the singularity of its production companies and content, an “exemplary” version of the American citizen would be a valuable character in order to relate to as many viewers as possible. Thus, the celebrity character is created, which capitalizes on what is afforded of the technology of television and is proven to be incredibly lucrative. From this unit of media language comes millions of connecting cultural symbols, such as the housewife and even specific celebrities like Lucille Ball⁴ that compile a generation’s television media lexicon. *The Artist as Virus* highlights video artists who use culturally transformative technologies of their era. Each exploit its societally-standardized format for use and the highly intricate and implicit sociocultural media language as readymade formal elements. This is a form of reflexive art, as the works use the popularizing media of the era to

²Richard Dawkins on the 'Cultural Meme', *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, 2015), <https://www.wsj.com/video/richard-dawkins-on-the-cultural-meme/>

³ David Joselit, “Avatar,” essay, in *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (MIT Press, 2007), pp. 153-171.

⁴ Ibid.

discuss the era through its popularizing media. As such, merely through this technique of reflexivity, each artist creates inherently political art.

Popularizing media forms become new tools for communication, but first must develop a format for successful transmission of an idea from one party to another. The technology itself is a fixed machine or software, thus this media language structure or syntax organically develops from what the media affords.⁵ Each media technology employed by the artists in this exhibition had to first develop its own societally standardized format for use in order to become a cultural tool. *The Artist as Virus* highlights artists whose work exploit the affordance of the standardized format of their era's popularizing media technology as an efficient tool for widespread communication.

To summarize James J.'s "Theory of Affordances"⁶ in relation to this argument, an object's innate properties provide opportunities for its functional use. Chris Burden's series of four pieces called *The Television Commercials* (1973-1977), exploits the affordance of his era's popularizing media of the same title. Objectively, the fixed technology of the television affords the opportunity to disseminate information to the mass population. Thus, the societally standardized format of the television commercial was designed due to the opportunity to sell a product to a mass audience. In *Chris Burden Promo* (1976), Burden exploited this historically pivotal postwar medium by replacing a good, service or other socially expected item, with himself. The intention was to suggest that if his message, (both in the definition given by

⁵ James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," essay, in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York, New York: Psychology Press, 1986), pp. 127-146.

⁶ Ibid.

McLuhan⁷ and the entertainment industry), were to be played for long enough that people would be “sold” on the idea that Burden was the most famous artist of the era. In short, exploiting this culturally standardized format offered Burden an outrageously efficient means to transmit his own artistic idea.

Jayson Musson’s popularizing media, YouTube, in contrast to the fixed transmission pathway of television broadcasting from Burden’s era, affords the opportunity for anyone to upload their own videos. Thus, a new standardized format of the YouTube channel was developed based on the opportunity for anyone to disseminate their knowledge. Musson as his persona “Hennessy Youngman”. exploited this standardized format as his YouTube series performance piece, *Art Thoughtz*. This platform allowed efficient communication of two artistic messages. The first was to leverage visibility that he otherwise may not have had as an artist of color, and the other was to disperse knowledge about art that is infamously inaccessible to those without higher education.

Kyle McDonald’s *Exhausting a Crowd* (2015), is a software hybrid that exploits the standardized formats of two popularizing media, an interactive website and a surveillance webcam. The interactive website affords the ability for many users to gather and communicate in one virtual space and has been standardized for entertainment and gaming platforms. The surveillance webcam affords essentially the opposite. This popularizing media technology allows for one camera to gather visual information about an area and has been standardized as a tool for mass policing of populations by few with power. These two technologies have opposing streams of communication transmission and connotation, one a democratic platform for community

⁷ Marshall McLuhan and W. Terrence. Gordon, “Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man,” essay, in *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (Gingko Press, 2015), pp. 18-35.

engagement and the other in essence a totalitarian tool used by government and capital encroachment on personal affairs of the general population (see plates 1 and 2). McDonald produces a hybrid media format that creates a communication circuit. Internet users are invited to annotate observations on members in a crowd of people monitored from the surveillance camera. What results is something like a virtual rendition of a speculative fiction dystopia which mirrors the software, as the users are unified in policing the individuals on their screens.

In addition to a standardized format for syntax, each popular media develops its own semantic media lexicon with implicit cultural meaning. Media lexicon refers to the total storage of coded language developed as a result of the popularizing media. Each unit of language in society's media lexicon contains implicit meaning from culturally inherited techniques for use of the popularizing media. These memes act as cultural readymades. Due to the fact that the viewer is already fluent in the language of the artist's chosen medium, they may freely utilize the coded language as a *tool* for artistic communication. Through various employments of Bertolt Brecht's Alienation Effect⁸, such as irony, arbitrage, and camp⁹, these artists exploit their generation's popularizing media techniques for their cultural currency rather than for their pedestrian function.

For example, as previously discussed, the television commercial is culturally understood to be a standardized media format designed to sell commodities to mass audiences. Thus, techniques for use of the media that best yield increased awareness and profit within the medium

⁸ Brecht, Bertolt. 1949. "A Short Organum for the Theatre". *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. London: Methuen, 1964

⁹ Sontag, Susan. *Notes on "Camp"*. Penguin Random House (2018)

constraint of the short allotment of time become highly popular. Consequently, these advantageous methods disperse virally and develop in the society's media lexicon. Returning to the previously discussed work, *Chris Burden Promo* (1976), Burden exploited not only the commercial platform but also these techniques to instead "sell" the concept that he was the most famous artist of the era. These are the simple techniques of short, bold, easily legible text that manipulate the constraint of the small television screen effectively and the clear voiced narration repeated three times. Through the alienation effect, in which an artist makes the "familiar strange" Burden distanced these inherited media techniques from their common signified meaning, and as a result created an ironic piece that suggested that not only the methods he employed, but his message dispersed was a form of propaganda.

Jayson Musson produced a Brechtian video piece at a risk-free profit through the exploitation of "low brow" media language in exchange for fine art. Jayson Musson's YouTube channel *Art Thoughtz* and persona Hennessy Youngman exploit the socially inherited knowledge of techniques developed by naïve YouTubers and more explicitly the persona of black men on the internet through trans-cultural arbitrage. The media platform itself is socially considered to be unrefined, especially in comparison to the art community, which he directly makes his content for and about. He crafts his constructed image of an artist on the periphery through the exploitation of readymade YouTuber techniques. These include the playful font choices and transitions that clearly come from the software iMovie which is free with the purchase of an Apple computer. He "breaks the fourth wall"¹⁰ by exposing the computer-based production further with its low-quality Photo Booth camera resolution. Additionally, he structures his episodes similarly to the YouTuber aesthetic. They are typically just under six minutes, begin

¹⁰ Brecht, Bertolt. 1949. "A Short Organum for the Theatre".

with an introduction, and end with his version of the “like and subscribe” trope, which is perhaps the most infamous meme of YouTube. These adaptations of the YouTuber’s aesthetic ostracize him from the community he is speaking to. In continuation of the essentially “tacky” environment that Musson procured for Youngman, his persona takes on a camped stereotype of the “ghetto black man”¹¹ who is unacademically educated yet highly astute in the esoteric history of the art world. This paradoxical persona, in addition to Musson’s production of art about art on essentially a folk interface, defamiliarize¹² the art community’s preconceived notions of fine art and also YouTube culture. He is taking advantage of this arbitrage opportunity by exploiting the ‘cheap’ implications of YouTube and racial biases and selling it high for his niche understanding to the art community.

This media exploitation art form is reflexive, meaning that the medium employed mirrors the artistic message. Through the exploitation of the newly popularized media technology of their era, the artist inherently discusses their era. For example. Paul Pfeiffer’s 2001 work *Race Riot* uses the media technology of the camcorder as a sculpture installed in a glass box. The camcorder media allows for anybody to record the events that they view. Thus, it is a medium in relation to the title, which refers to political protests against racial injustice that had only begun to be properly documented with the emergence of portable camcorders that allowed people of color to tape their own experiences. This speaks to the generation of the emerging technology. However, in addition, the video on loop is footage of Michael Jordan’s overjoyed reaction to

¹¹ Sontag, Susan. *Notes on "Camp"*. Penguin Random House (2018)

¹² Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique.” Essay. In *Theory of Prose*. 1917.

winning the generationally definitive 1996 National Basketball Association Championships.

Typical of Pfeiffer's work, this appropriated footage is so meticulously cropped and shortened that the behavior and situation *could* have been a race riot. This is a prototypical reflexive portrait of the era's media ecology. Cyberneticist Gregory Bateson calls works like these "deutero-learning machines". William Kaizen describes these learning machines as systems that: "reveal the grounds of their own communicability by exposing the rules through which a communication system is framed, self-reflexively revealing their embeddedness in a particular social context by working from within that context in order to reveal its restraints".¹³

Pfeiffer created a video piece embodied in the actual machine's form of his generation's popularizing media and framed the scenario through the title, which culturally implied violence, even though the footage did not present anything of the sort. This revealed a sociocultural expectation and provided a pedagogical experience for the viewer of the generation's media ecology.

One cannot discuss this phenomenon of reflexivity without bringing up the artist Ryan Trecartin, who creates larger than life "pretend" home-videos through the same cultural techniques established for making a home video, such as using friends and family as cast members and making characters with crazy costumes and makeup. The home video is a highly common, culturally established format on YouTube. Unlike Musson, who exploits YouTuber

¹³ William Kaizen, "Steps to an Ecology of Communication: *Radical Software*, Dan Graham, and the Legacy of Gregory Bateson," *Art Journal* 67, no. 3 (2008): pp. 86-106.

techniques for arbitrage, Trecartin embodies them.¹⁴ His medium *is* his generation's popularizing media format, and he himself reflects a shift in artistic method native to the new media ecology.¹⁵

Thus, his video, *Junior War* (2013), creates a meta-reflexive portrait of the era through the exploitation of his own oeuvre. The piece revisits his first footage shot from 1999 that was created before the emergence of streaming services like YouTube. His method of home video production is essentially the same as his later work, which justifies the authenticity of its media embodiment over exploitation. Instead, he exploits the footage as well as the art community's implicit cultural knowledge of his work to produce a piece that shows the generational shift in video persona.

Now in the current era, the popularizing software of 3D animation affords the ability to create hyper-realistic characters. In essence, this new popularizing media affords the enhanced opportunity for those who live in a dysphoric or hyper-politicized body to transcend their corporeal form through digital avatars. Artist Jesse Kanda's exploitation of this affordance in collaboration with trans-nonbinary musician Alejandra Ghersi, otherwise known as her stage name Arca, creates a reflexive portrait of the generation's altering perspective on binary and growing visibility of the trans and gender nonconforming community. For Ghersi's debut album, Kanda brought to life Ghersi's childhood alter ego, "Xen", which the album was named after.

¹⁴ Holland Cotter, "Video Art Thinks Big: That's Showbiz," The New York Times (The New York Times, January 6, 2008).

¹⁵ William Kaizen, "Steps to an Ecology of Communication: Radical Software, Dan Graham, and the Legacy of Gregory Bateson"

Xen is described to be a “girl” who uses she pronouns but isn’t really a female. Kanda describes of his best friend’s alter ego, “Xen comes out in Ghersi... It’s this kind of ghost. A spirit. Alejandr(a)’s spirit.”¹⁶ To produce the avatar for Arca’s music videos, Kanda rigged Ghersi’s physical body into a 3D rendered figure that brought to life the hyperfeminine manifestation of Ghersi’s alter-ego. As Xen has manifested and Alejandra has transitioned, the two have found ways to formally unite.

Furthermore, the mere exploitation of the newly popularized media forms expose how the technology is typically employed and consumed, and subsequently the subconsciously followed cultural codes. As 3D animation was originally invented to make video games, these software technologies allow programmers to design racially and sexually fetishized female avatars as well as gruesome creatures to meet the consumer demand for sex and violence from the male-dominated “gamer” community. The design of this technology allows for hyper meticulous body modification with explicit delineations of racial or genital features. Its typical use and purpose for manufacture unveil the unfortunately perpetuating existence of the toxic historical canon of the female muse and exoticism. However, these afford excellent opportunities for marginalized artists to conceive virtual avatars that drag their own personal or imagined attributes and narratives, such as Kanda and Ghersi’s “Xen”, and Claudia Hart’s female virtual figures¹⁷.

This highly efficient artistic technique exploits innate and incredibly intricate social codes, and thus creates inherently political art. Thus, *The Artist as Virus* constructs a critical, reevaluated mosaic of American popular culture. Each artist contributes their generational

¹⁶ Emilie Friedlander, “Cover Story: Arca Finds Xen,” *The FADER* (The FADER, October 7, 2015)

¹⁷ Claudia Hart and Claudia Herbst, “Virtual Sex: The Female Body in Digital Art”

critique through their media-reflexive work. Some directed their message towards the art world, such as *The Television Commercials (1973-1977)*, the YouTube channel and *Art Thoughtz* by Jayson Musson. and others are more politically charged towards the general society, such as Paul Pfeiffer's *Race Riot* and Kyle McDonald's *Exhausting a Crowd*. However, *The Artist as Virus* naturally unveils many layers of art politics that go beyond intent. As described, the show highlights works that *exploit* the popularizing media of their era through its platforms and coded language. Where these pieces were originally made available provides context and so does the community they were intended for. Some used the media platforms in their native habitats while others transplanted them into galleries. Many of these pieces were made by artists for the art community and rely on this elite crowd's specific sociocultural coded language. While Burden and Musson's works were made to be seen on their respective era's media, both exploited this technology to speak directly to the artist community. Conversely, Trecartin's work embodies the YouTube and home video user and instead exploited himself to discuss the era, however, his work is incredibly confusing to understand. Pfeiffer's work, which posed one of the more explicitly political positions in *The Artist as Virus*, was featured in his Whitney exhibition after winning the first ever \$100,000 Bucksbaum Award in 2000¹⁸. This contradictory mess should be the expected result of an exhibition that gathers a field study of artists who use media culture as their formal elements. Each piece is reflexive and so is the show. It mirrors the cross-generational media ecology that each one of them participate in, but none can control¹⁹. The

¹⁸ Holland Cotter, "ART IN REVIEW; Paul Pfeiffer," The New York Times (The New York Times, January 18, 2002)

¹⁹ Kaizen, "Steps to an Ecology of Communication: Radical Software, Dan Graham, and the Legacy of Gregory Bateson, 91.

works are reliquaries of the era's discourse, through their preservation of its political agitation manifested in the popularizing media for communication.

Works in Show:**Television:**

Chris Burden

The T.V. Commercials (1973-1977), 1973-77/2000

3:46 min, color, sound

Camcorder:

Paul Pfeiffer

Race Riot, 2001

Digital video loop, camcorder, wood, glass linen

Camcorder/YouTube:

Ryan Trecartin

Junior War, 2013

24:25 min, color, sound, HD video

YouTube

Jayson Musson

Art Thoughtz, 2010-2012

YouTube channel based performance

Interactive Website/Surveillance Webcam

Kyle McDonald

Exhausting a Crowd (exhaustingacrowd.com), 2015

Website

3D Animation

Jesse Kanda, Alejandra Ghersi

Thevery, 2011

2:44 3D animation music video, sound (music from album *Xen* by Arca)

3D Animation

Claudia Hart

Caress, 2011

HD QuickTime video, custom wood box, shelf, computer, speakers

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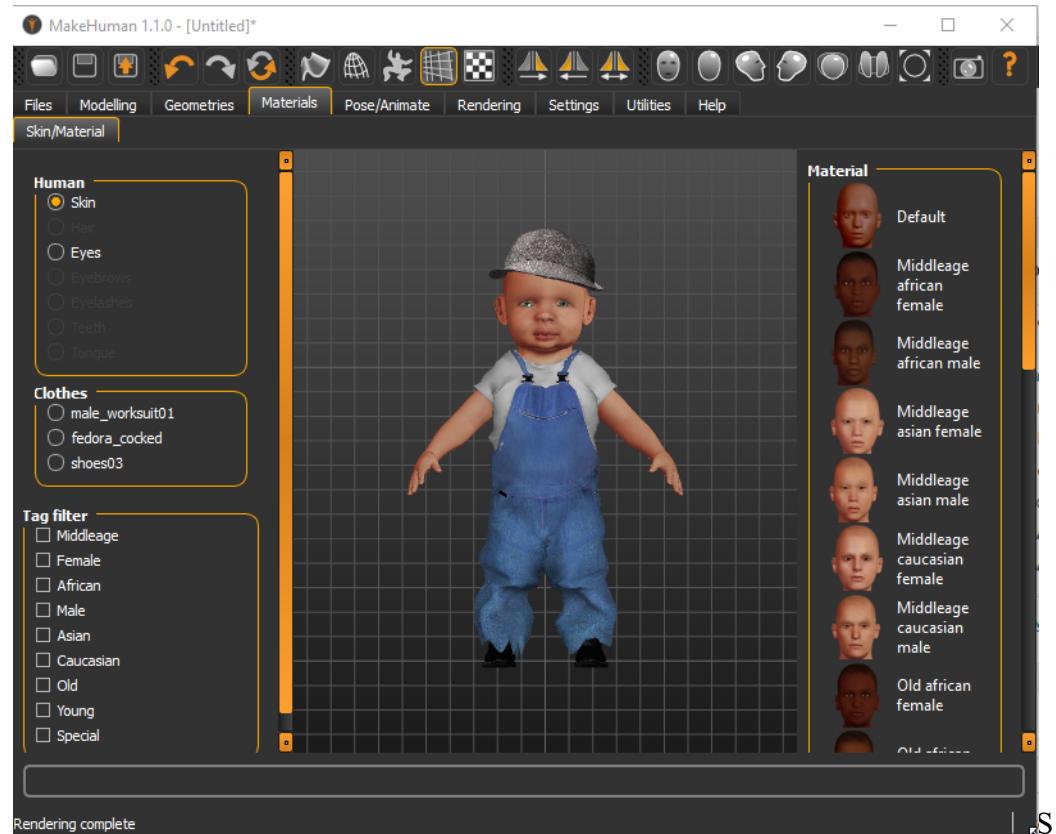


Standardized format for use of interactive website: gaming platform (above), surveillance web camera, for civilian policing (below)

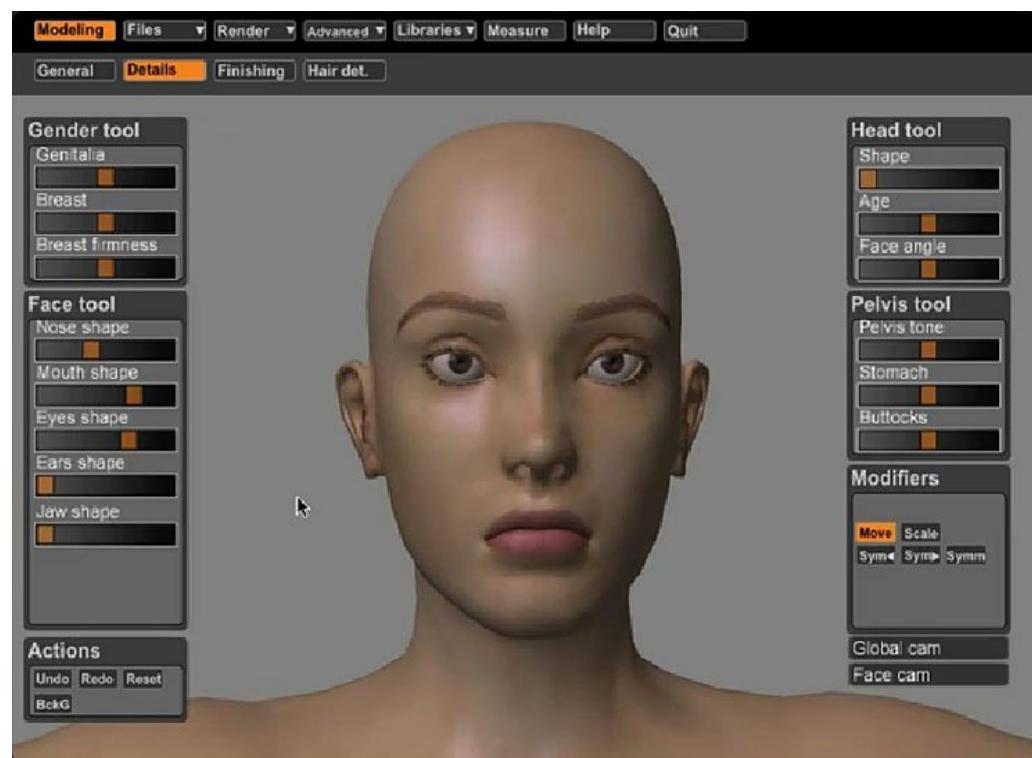




Exhausting a Crowd by Kyle McDonald

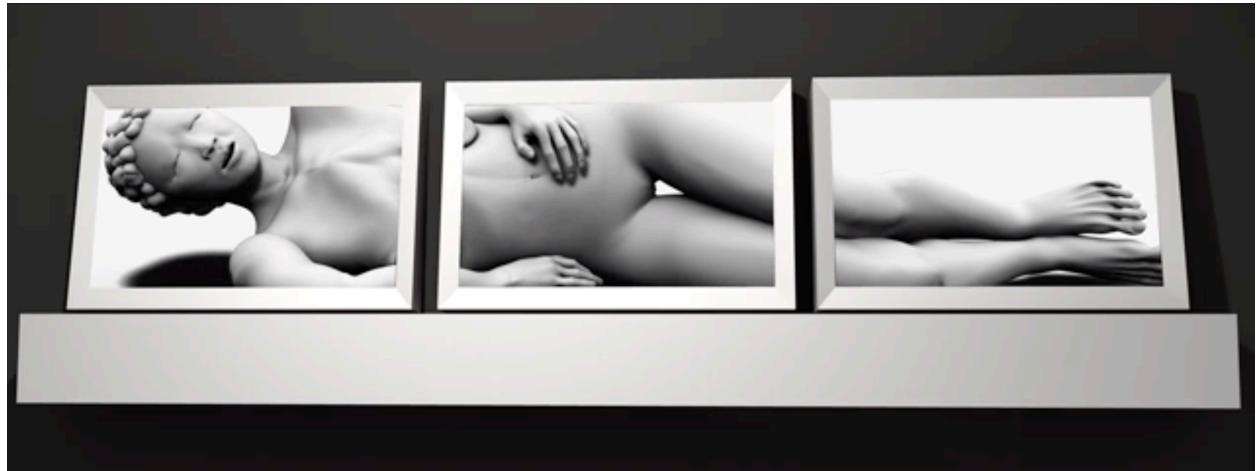


Software affordances from 3D animation

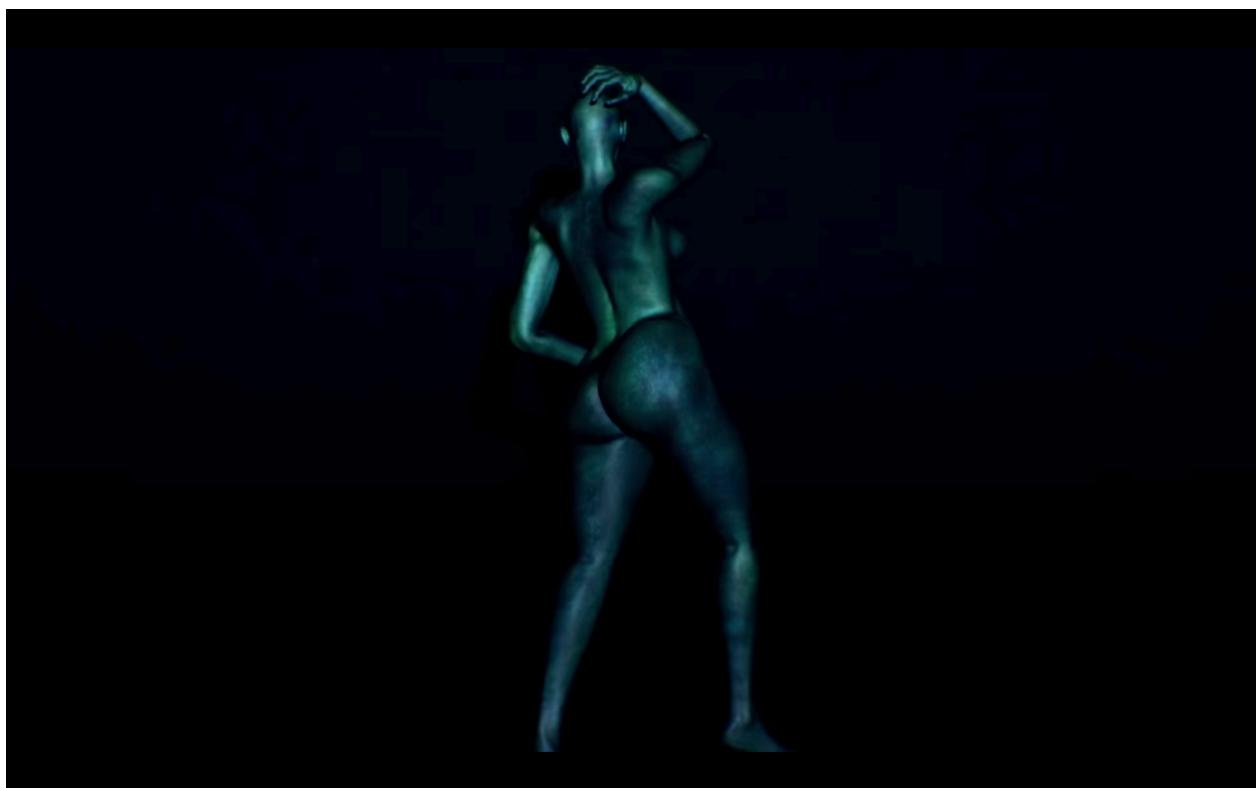




Software affordances continued: downloadable pack extension for software from internet.



Claudia Hart, *Caress*, 2011.



Jesse Kanda and Arca, *Thievery*, 2014.