

Exploring the Digital Physique: Human Figures in New Media Art

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Vol. 02, No. 01(2025); pp 63-71

Received : 04-05-2025

Accepted : 26-06-2025

Published Online : 30-06-2025

Identifier-DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34256/glim25.0201063>

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Abstract

Background: Human figure forms have remained one of the most enduring image elements for visual artists since the era of early human civilization. Across time and regions, artists have explored a wide range of approaches to representing the human form—from absolute realism to stylized, analytical, distorted, surreal, or expressionist tendencies. With the advent of electronic image processing technologies in the 1960s, a new medium of artistic expression emerged, and human figures naturally became integral to video art and experimental film practices. Figurative representation persisted as a key concern, even as abstraction gained popularity.

Purpose: This article aims to examine the ongoing use and transformation of human figures in contemporary figurative new media art, with a focus on how technological advancements have expanded the possibilities of representation.

Methods: The study traces the shift from analogue to digital video production and analyzes how artists manipulate human figures through lens-based media, digital effects, and 3D graphics software. The discussion is framed through both a critical overview and the author's own practice as a new media artist.

Results: Contemporary artists employ a wide range of digital techniques to create human figure imagery, from realistic renderings to highly stylized or surreal digital constructs. These approaches reflect not only technical innovation but also conceptual diversity in how the body is perceived and represented in the digital age.

Conclusions: Figurative representation in new media art continues to evolve, offering new visual languages and meanings. As an artist working within this domain, the author explores this diversity to better understand the broader landscape of human figure use in contemporary digital art practices.

Keywords: Video Art, New Media Art, Figurative Art, Video Installation, Interactive Art, Contemporary Art, Immersive Art

1. Introduction

As human beings, we have always given human existence the maximum priority over any other species on earth since the beginning of our civilization. So, our gods look human, our politics, and our stories revolve around the human body, which is one of the most common visual elements used in every art form and discipline for thousands of years. Our philosophical thoughts have been greatly affected by the scientific advancements of the recent era and complications in social conditions. This scenario compelled artists to create completely new forms of art, starting with Dadaism, Installation, Land Art, Site Specific, and Video Art, experimental music, and many others [1].

Artists willing to use human figure forms, rejecting abstract imageries by manipulating videos, started filming humans to make 'figurative' Video Art and added visual effects to create innovative forms of moving images. The inclusion of the human figure as a subject concerns issue of identity, relationships, and the influence of technology on our lives. In this article, I will look at how artists use the human form in their new media artworks, concentrating on its connotations and relevance.

2. Use of Human Figures in New Media Art

2.1 The Beginning of New Media Art

After the advent of the 'Motion Picture', moving images became a new fascination for many visual artists. Before the availability of portable video cameras, artists and filmmakers experimented with celluloid [2]. But those works were mostly made with cinematic ideas. During the 1960s, many artists were experimenting with different non-conventional art mediums and starting various art movements. British artist David Hall, Korean American artist Nam June Paik, and American artist Wolf Vostel started experimenting with television sets in this decade. Later, in 1967 Sony Corporation released the commercially available portable video camera 'Portapak', at a cheaper price. And that marked the true start of the era of the Video Art, which eventually turned into the New Media Art in the later decades. Artists coming from different ideologies of different art movements like Fluxus, Performance art, Body art, Pop Art, Conceptual Art, experimental film, avant-garde music, etc. started experimenting with video as a new medium of art with moving images [3].

2.2 Experiment with Celluloid: Early cinematic experiments

Andy Warhol's short, silent, black-and-white film of portraits from the neck up against plain background, named 'Screen Tests' (1964-66) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.1 below) represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of experimental film and a precursor to the development of New Media Art [4]. Subjects were asked to sit almost motionless for about three minutes while being filmed in slow motion. This approach created a novel form of portraiture—a moving yet nearly static image of a person. The human existence becomes a bridge to the still to moving image world in this work.

Maya Deren's 'Meshes of the Afternoon' (1943) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.2 below) is a mixture of Surrealism and Hollywood Film Noir [5]. The film delves into the subconscious, depicting how a simple incident evolves into a profound emotional journey as a woman experiences the blurred boundaries between waking life and the dream world. This cinematic work is also another example of the precursor to the New Media art where the works stands between a narrative cinema and a non-narrative art piece.

2.3 The Dawn of 'Video Art'

Nam June Paik, often regarded as the father of 'Video Art,' made an unforgettable imprint with 'Global Groove' (1973) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.3 below), a seminal piece in the early history of New Media Art [6]. This video collage manipulates human forms by merging Japanese advertising with avant-garde performances by luminaries such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Allen Ginsberg. Dancers move across distorted colour spaces, Charlotte Moorman performs on the TV Cello, and historic icons such as Richard Nixon endure magnetic alterations. Paik's radical comment on global communications and media saturation takes the shape of an electronic collage, breaking television norms while combining cross-cultural motifs, creating an absolutely new effect of line drawing of the moving dancers, Pop iconography with surreal visual wit, and Neo-Dada sensibility.

In another seminal work by Joan Jonas, 'Vertical Roll' (1972) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.4 below), she uses a common television glitch, the rolling bar, a television set malfunction, which serves as a symbolic and disruptive element inside the artwork [7]. The piece opens with a bar sliding down the screen, gradually exposing parts of Jonas's face, gestures, and dressed and undressed body. 'Vertical Roll' is primarily concerned with issues of

representation and feminine identity in the media. Jonas' fragmentary physical presence challenges viewers' typical conceptions and consumption of televised images in a period when television was a dominant medium.

Bill Viola's art explores human cognition and experience, focusing on birth, death, love, emotion, and spirituality. In 'The Passing' (1991) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.5 below), Viola blends consciousness, dreams, and daily life in the Southwest desert [8]. He portrays his mortality through a newborn, his deceased mother, and himself in water. The black and white presentation blurs the line between reality and sur-reality, guided by Viola's breathing soundtrack. This work combines television and deep philosophy, challenging our perception and addressing existential questions. Here he uses human figures as actors to deal with the philosophical aspects of life and mortality.

2.4 The beginning of Interactivity

In the context of figurative video art, the incorporation of interactivity into the artwork symbolises a watershed event in the progression of artistic expression and audience interaction. It represents the transition from passive viewing to active involvement, in which artists used emerging technology to create interactive experiences that profoundly changed the interaction between the artwork and the observer.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's 'Lorna' (1979-1984) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.6 below) can be regarded as a seminal work in this context [9]. It was the first piece of art to incorporate laser-disc technology, allowing users to interact with and control the world of an agoraphobic woman named Lorna. Leeson enabled users to manage temporal components with the narrative structure of the film with the new technology. Viewers act as proxies, watching Lorna remotely and manipulating her confined life in the room by a remote-control device diving further into her psychological profile via voyeuristic sequences. The narrative has three different endings, highlighting the power dynamics between human agency and mass media's ubiquitous impact. Through the themes of surveillance and mediated experiences, Leeson emphasises the human figure as a conduit for viewers to connect with and reflect on technology's influence on our lives.

'Videvent' (1973-1975) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.7 below) by Brian Hoey was a groundbreaking series of live works that explores the interaction between imaging technologies and performers [10]. It combined live and delayed images on a single monitor using a tape-loop feedback mechanism and two video cameras to produce a dynamic visual sequence.

This real-time engagement allowed viewers to experience themselves as they were in the past. Viewers directly connect with the human existence shown in the video. Here, the character in the video and the viewer complements each other. Unlike the static art forms, here the 'figure' seems to be a living being like the observer of it.

All these approaches marked the start of a significant revolution in the art world, one that is still evolving as technology progresses and artists explore the unlimited potential of interactivity.

2.5 The Age of Digital Video Manipulation

The introduction of 3D software and compositing tools in the late 1970s and early 1980s sparked the beginning of digital video manipulation. With the introduction of digital timeline-based software like Avid Media Composer and Adobe Premiere, the editing suite was transformed from a studio address to anyone's home or laptop computer [11]. After releasing Autodesk's Maya (1998) [12], Discreet Logic's Inferno (1985) [13] and Adobe After Effects (1993) [14] it expanded the creative possibilities for artists by providing the tool to create sophisticated 3D visuals and animation, revolutionising video compositing for art narrative. These technologies democratised digital video modification as they matured and became more accessible, allowing independent artists to explore new aspects of expression and narrative in their work. Today, a wide range of 3D and compositing tools are available, creating a dynamic landscape of digital video art production across a wide range of budgets and skill levels.

Figurative New Media Art refers to a variety of creative practises that use digital and electronic means to reflect the human figure or figurative components in their works. These works frequently use digital technology to investigate, reinterpret, and push the boundaries of figurative representation, such as computer graphics, animation, virtual reality, Projection Mapping and interactive installations. Several separate types or techniques can be recognised within this wider group.

2.6 Video Photography and Compositing

Like the classical process of Video Art, artists shoot with video cameras, edit, and manipulate the image using new compositing software where they can cut, trim, stitch, and manipulate the video as per their needs to achieve a desired visual. Making video collages or combining separate videos into one composite output has become easier with this use of advanced technology.

For example, Israeli artist Michal Rovner removes the background of walking people to place them in a different

perspective to complete her composition. Her site-specific work, 'Current' (2012) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.8 below), digs into the interesting intersection of art, history, and industrial legacy [15]. This piece is part of a former industrial site where coal mixing left permanent imprints on its towering cement structure. Rovner draws inspiration from the large cement building, Mischanlage, resurrecting the historical significance of coal coking remains on its walls. As a visual language, she uses the stream of walking people in tiny sizes to show a movement synonymous to the title. Therefore, the figures here represent both the flow and the existence of the people associated with the theme.

2.7 2D Animation

Russia's contemporary artist collective AES+F created 'Last Riot' (2005-2007) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.9 below), the first part of triptych The Liminal Space Trilogy, a video masterpiece, immerses spectators in a mesmerising picture of the future in which the virtual world formed from the actual world of the twentieth century that develops exponentially [16]. It is a computer-animated video work made from a lot of still photographs that were animated and composited painstakingly, taking inspiration from the great master artist Caravaggio. In this work, we see attractive teenagers engage in violent behaviour with no repercussions, blurring the distinctions between genders, victims, and aggressors. This epic plays on triptych screens amid an imaginary environment, facing modern political and cultural concerns such as militarised youth and the dissolution of social systems with blurring lines between ideology, history, and ethics, allowing for revolt and transformation. The artists use human figures as the characters in the paintings of Caravaggio, but let them animate in a strange manner, making the inanimate figures appear to be living. Accompanied by classically flavoured music, the still images create more impact on the viewers in a cinematic way, yet creating the essence of New Media Art.

2.8 Projection Mapping with Installation

Diva (2019) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.10 below), an amazing work by French artist Thomas Voillaume and multidisciplinary artist Jérémy Oury, stands as a mysterious presence in the field of figurative New Media Art [17]. It's a 3.5 meter tall monumental sculpture made by Thomas and has a projection of a video made by Jeremy over its body, transforming from a contemplative, frozen figure into an interactive communicator with the surrounding world. This massive

humanoid sculpture represents a tenuous equilibrium at the crossroads of human progress and the inevitable implications of industrialization's breakdown. Diva enables spectators to participate, examine, and comprehend through magnificent projections of colourful patches and patterns that reflect shards of history onto its surface. This novel combination of sculpture and interactive projection deviates from standard sculptural works and provides a dynamic dimension to the Lights On event.

2.9 3-D Modelling and Animation

Claudia Hart's figurative New Media Art work merges the current with the ancient, combining cutting-edge 3D animation software with iconic iconography such as female nudity and conventional still life. Her works frequently combine sensual feminine shapes with the organised and deterministic domain of digital design. One of her most prominent pieces, 'Ophelia' (2008) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.11 below) tackles the issue of death within Hart's concept of a futuristic society in which technology and hyper-real bodies resist decay [18]. A fragile, nude female figure sinks into the depths of an ocean littered with rubbish and plastic bags in this painting, evoking comparisons to Shakespeare's Ophelia. This feminist portrayal weaves together themes of loss and disintegration, including the loss of youth, love, and harmony with nature.

2.10 Interactive Video Installation

In the digital age the interactive installation gained a new technological development which enabled the artist to create even more intense experience for the viewer. In 'Sharing Faces' (2013) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.12 below) Media artist Kyle McDonald modifies photographs and facial expressions, to investigate the theme of shared human experiences and relationships [19]. The artist employs computer vision algorithms to recognise and track visitors' faces in real time. The identified faces are then seamlessly included into the artwork, combining with the other previously recorded photos of faces. The viewer is supposed to look at the work for 3 seconds, when the system looks for the perfect image that matches the orientation, and expression of the viewer. As a result, the project produces a one-of-a-kind and compelling experience in which visitors may see their own faces reflected in the faces of others, emphasising the common human experience.

2.11 Immersive Video Installations

Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda works with pure data and makes stunning abstract visuals. But in his installations, in his words, “I make half of the piece, and people complete the other half. If I don’t have any audience, this is nothing.” One of his colossal installations, ‘The Transfinite’ (2011) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.13 below) is a 45-foot-tall, 60-foot-wide projection where Ikeda displays flashing black-and-white lines that resemble Zebra Crossings, sometimes barcodes [20]. These lines react dynamically producing mesmerising rhythms to an accompanying audio component created by the artist’s binary codes. Viewers walk on the projection, engaging with the moving bars and get immersed in the visual code of our daily lives. Here the audience play the role of the human figures which gives Ryoji’s work the true meaning of it.

2.12 Virtual Reality

The cutting age technology of Virtual Reality lets viewers experience the virtual world in a physical sensation through VR glasses. Artist Mark Farid takes advantage of this opportunity to produce ‘Seeing I’ (2020/2) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.14 below) in which he pushes the frontiers of psychology and sensory deprivation while exploring the self’s position in nature as well as how this ‘self’ interacts with society and technology [21]. For a week as part of a public exhibition, artist Mark Farid uses a virtual reality headset to experience life through the eyes and ears of another person, hearing only what they have heard and seeing only what they have seen being influenced by the Stanford Prison Experiment (1971), Philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s ‘Simulacra and Simulation’ (1981), and Artist Josh Harris’ ‘Quiet: We Live in Public’ (1999). His work examines the malleability of the self in the face of immersive technology, challenging our notions of consciousness and free choice. Here, Farid himself becomes the figure while incorporating the ‘other’.

2.13 Data Visualisation and Figurative Representations

American visual artist Casey Reas approaches conceptual, procedural, and minimal topics from a modern software perspective. His 10-minute digital video project titled ‘100% Grey Coverage’ (2013) (to refer to the images, see illustration list no.15 below) is derived from the ‘Signal to Noise’, a computer programme that converts raw terrestrial television signals into visual material [22]. He creates abstract images for this project using a sophisticated

collage engine. Signal to Noise, he claims, shatters and distorts current information into a new data structure where figurative representation of the video signal appears in the form of television patches of colour in arbitrary blocks of glitch visuals.

Each of these subcategories of figurative New Media Art provides artists with distinct chances to investigate the portrayal of the human form in the digital era. These artists frequently push the boundaries of traditional art forms, embracing the adaptability and interaction provided by digital tools and technology to produce thought-provoking, inventive, and engaging figurative works.

2.14 Aesthetics of figurative new media art

New Media art, as compared to traditional art forms, provides us with a new perspective on how to look at Visual Art itself, therefore creates a new language and aesthetics of its own. We need to rethink and redesign our understanding of art in its context. Using human figures helps us directly compare them with traditional works and realise their aesthetic nature from a new perspective.

2.15 Incorporation of the Time Dimension

Through figurative depictions, New Media Art allows artists to investigate time and temporality. They portray the passage of time and record different events inside a single artwork by adding time-lapse effects or montages. This use of time produces the illusion of simultaneity, with numerous instances of the human form coexisting on the same canvas. This artistic decision allows for a more in-depth examination of the complexity of human existence while also challenging our linear view of time.

2.16 Distorted Realism

Artists working in figurative New Media Art frequently experiment with altering or changing the human figure. They achieve surrealism and abstraction by varying sizes, textures, and colours. These aberrations are creative reflections of human existence’s intricacies and conflicts. The combination of natural and man-made components disrupts our perspective of reality and inspires awe and curiosity.

2.17 Hybrid Realities

Figurative new media art frequently blurs the lines between reality and virtuality, producing hybrid universes that capture the observer. Artists use tools like augmented reality and virtual reality to superimpose digital components on the

actual environment, altering the viewer's perception. This fusion of organic and digital results in a visually rich and engaging experience in which the human form serves as a bridge to another realm.

2.18 Interactivity and Dynamic Motion

The use of technology in figurative New Media Art allows for interactivity and dynamic motion, which enhances the aesthetic experience. Viewers can actively interact with the artwork by using motion sensors or touch interfaces in real time, changing its form and behaviour. This interactive component brings the human figure to life, encouraging involvement and co-creation. These artworks' dynamic and fluid character adds an element of surprise and spontaneity, capturing the viewer's attention.

2.19 Visual Abundance and Complexity

Figurative New Media Art works frequently display a visual profusion and intricacy that takes the observer into a captivating universe. Layered textures, rich patterns, and brilliant colours combine to produce a multisensory experience that elicits a wide range of emotions. The combination of organic and synthetic materials excites the senses and creates a complex tapestry of visual perception. These artworks' attention to detail and precise craftsmanship add to their aesthetic appeal.

3. Conclusion

Now examining these works, we can see the tendency of working with the figures in this way has some more thoughts than just making it a moving image art or as an animated painting. They surely challenge the commercial approach of Movies and Television, where moving image is the commodity. As Duchamp raised the question through his work 'Fountain' in 1917 Armory Show in New York, these artists are also addressing the same quest, as the outlook towards art has not been changed much around the world in the mass people's mind. So, they need new experience to understand the nature of this post-modern ideology of ephemerality, simultaneity, and rule breaking attitude. While abstraction is not yet a well-known phenomenon to the common viewer, the figurative approach can involve them better, where they can be absorbed into a new immersive world of all-inclusiveness.

Figurative New Media Art is a blend of tradition and innovation that pushes the boundaries of creative expression and invites us to discover new depths of beauty and significance. In conclusion, the aesthetics and meanings

of figurative New Media Art are inextricably linked to the possibilities given by digital technology and the changing character of modern culture. These works frequently urge spectators to consider issues of identity, technology, interaction, and the digital domain, promoting a complex and dynamic dialogue between art and society by giving them multisensory experience that was missing in the traditional forms. In the world after 'Relativity' and 'Quantum Physics' New Media Art makes us conscious about the subjective nature of any artwork and serves as a missing link to the future of mankind with the past through its time-dependant approach, where human figures play the role of our alter ego in some parallel world. We feel it is not a separate art object anymore, we are also a part of the whole process, like it happens everywhere in the universe.

Authorship contribution Mr. Anupam Basu led the research as a significant contributor.

Funding No funding was taken for conducting this research.

Conflict of interest The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

Similarity Index I hereby confirm that there is no similarity index in abstract and conclusion while overall is less than 10% where individual source contribution is 2% or less than it.

Data availability statement It is original and has neither been sent elsewhere nor published anywhere.

Declaration This research has been conducted ethically, reporting of those involved in this article.

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How to Cite?

Anupam Basu (2025). Exploring the Digital Physique: Human Figures in New Media Art. **Green Lifestyle and International Market-(GLIM)**, 2(01), 63-71. <https://doi.org/10.34256/glim25.0201063>
Retrieved from <https://glim.vyomhansjournals.com/index.php/fashion/article/view/35>
