

**The posthuman aesthetic of transcendence:
blank canvasses and naked faces**

Prof Amanda du Preez
Visual Culture Studies, Department of Visual Arts,
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*No longer a cloud on the distant horizon,
the posthuman is rapidly becoming an everyday reality.*
Hayles (2000)

The discussion that follows is aimed at establishing what the basic assumptions regarding transcendence in dominant posthuman discourses are and how they are translated into an aesthetic of transcendence. In briefly exploring the central tenets of posthuman discourses, it is in particular the disembodied strands (techno-transcendent type) that are correlated with the digital photography of the contemporary photographer Oleg Duryagin (Dou) (1983–). Dou's drive towards dehumanising his subjects through digital manipulation is identified as a posthuman strive towards transcending immanent and singular embodiment. Dou's posthuman portraits (fig. 1) leave his subjects with NAKED FACES that are stripped of any humanness and this corresponds with an earlier artistic example from the twentieth century, namely Kasimir Malevich's (1878–1935) 'aesthetic of transcendence' as formulated in his manifesto *Suprematism: World as nonobjectivity or eternal rest* (1919–1922). Through his 'Suprematist' BLANK CANVASSES, Malevich aspired towards 'transrational' and 'non-objective' art – thus to transcend the immanent art object. Finally, by means of brief comparative notes between Dou's digital photography and Malevich's Suprematism, I aim to identify an ongoing aesthetic of transcendence.

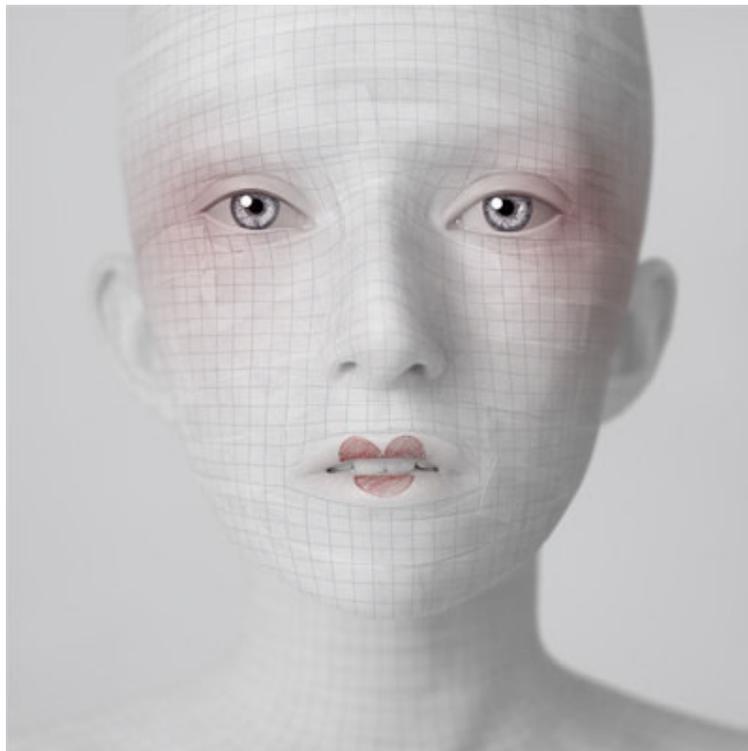


Figure 1: Oleg Dou, *Cell* (2007)
100 x 100 cm, C-print under Diasec Edition: 6

Posthumanism: the out-of-body experience

It is perhaps necessary to first distinguish between the terms 'posthumanism' and 'transhumanism', which are sometimes used interchangeably. 'Transhumanism' refers to those who are looking forward to engineering posthuman descendents (Agar 2007:12), in other words transhumanists aspire to a posthuman future. 'Posthumanism' refers to the end-product of technological intervention and enhancement. Katherine Hayles, in *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature and informatics* (1999:2 & 3) probably provides the most useful analysis of the posthuman condition:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.

For the purposes of this paper, posthumanism is broadly described as a techno-transcending undertaking, which means that it is aimed at transcending immanent nature through technology. As such, posthumanism "has much in common with spiritual aspirations to transcend animal nature for deathlessness, superhuman abilities, and superior insight"; in the case of posthumanism, however, the endeavour is pursued "through technology rather than ... through spiritual exercises" (Hughes, Bostrom & Agar 2007:4).

Through its techno-transcending nature, posthumanism propagates a utopian technological future whereby the human body is transformed "through GNR technologies – G for genetic engineering or biotechnology, N for nanotechnology, and R for robotics" (Dinerstein 2006:570). Evidently the bio-body is viewed as a flawed device that is desperately in need of augmentation. Proponents of techno-transcendence such as Gregory Stock (director of the Program on Medicine, Technology and Society at the University of California) advocate genetic engineering as "the flowering of our humanity, a chance to transcend aspects of our biology in ways other generations could only dream of" (Stock 2004:29).¹ Raymond Kurzweil (1999b:16), high-tech entrepreneur, predicts: "By 2009, computers will be embedded in our clothes. By 2019, they'll be hidden in our bodies. By 2099, human and machine intelligence will have merged" (Kurzweil 1999b:16).² Hans Moravec, from the Robotics Institute at the Carnegie Mellon University, is even more radical in his forecast for a posthuman future:

Why not use advanced neurological electronics like that which links it with the external world, to replace the gray matter as it begins to fail? Bit by bit our failing brain may be replaced by superior electronic equivalents, leaving our personality and thoughts clearer than ever, though, in time, no vestige of our original body or brain remains. The vat, like the harness before it, will have been rendered obsolete, while our thoughts and awareness continue. Our mind will have been transplanted from our original biological brain into artificial hardware. Transplantation to yet other hardware should be trivial in comparison. Like programs and data that can be transferred between computers without disrupting the processes they represent, our essences will become patterns that can migrate the information networks at will. Time and space will be more flexible – when our mind

¹ See Gregory Stock's *Redesigning humans: our inevitable genetic future* (2002) for an expanded version of his optimistic viewpoint on bio-engineering's possibilities.

² In *The age of spiritual machines* (1999a) Raymond Kurzweil develops his ideas on artificial intelligence and human consciousness further.

resides in very fast hardware, one second of real time may provide a subjective year of thinking time, while a thousand years spent on a passive storage medium will seem like no time at all. The very components of our minds will follow our sense of awareness in shifting from place to place at the speed of communication. We might find ourselves distributed over many locations, one piece of our mind here, another piece there, and our sense of awareness yet elsewhere, in what can no longer be called **an out-of-body experience**, for lack of a body to be out of (Moravec 1998:87, emphasis added).³

If we accept Moravec's prediction, existence can be narrowed down to the mind – a substance that can apparently be dislodged from our physical stratum and transplanted elsewhere with ease. Our embodied constitution is presented as just a temporarily inconvenience, a glitch in the process towards immortal techno-existence. Being is distilled into mere information (data, code, ones and zeroes) that can be extracted at will from the material stratum or the bio-organism. As Hayles explains, posthumanism “leap[s] from embodied reality to abstract information” by “privileging the abstract as the Real and downplaying the importance of material instantiation” (Hayles 1999:12 & 13). The bio-body is a mere coincidence in the evolutionary trajectory of the superior mind, or rather it is perceived as a prosthesis which apparently can easily be traded for another that is more durable and suitable for a digital lifestyle.

It comes as no surprise then that posthumanism is received with both terror and excitement. The reaction clearly depends on which side of the human divide one stands. Some people view posthumanism as the long-awaited decline of human control, while others opportunistically transpose the ‘autonomous liberal subject’ into the realm of a supposed disembodied and posthuman virtuality.⁴ Evidently, posthumanism embodies politics and, as Elaine Graham asserts, “contemporary technologies carry ethical and metaphysical, as well as material, implications [such as] crucial issues of identity, community and spirituality” (Graham 2004:12). Added to this are the hidden agendas of posthumanism, which have to be revealed, such as “what it means to be human, who counts as being fully human, who gets excluded and included in definitions of the (post)human – as well as what visions of the future are idealized – and idolized – in the name of technoscientific aspiration” (Graham 2004:12). When we reach the exalted state of posthumanism, it will probably not be a haven of corporeality with no traces left of our all too human and immanent predecessors but will rather be more a case of the posthuman being sculptured and tweaked according to very specific socio-political contexts. As Joel Dinerstein (2006:588) opines: “... only the myths of progress, the Adamic, and white, Western superiority *require* a posthuman future. The posthuman is the dream of bodies of pure potentiality – ones that do not decay but plug into networks of information and pleasure”. It therefore seems that posthumanism is not a possibility for all, but is only reserved for those who have “the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualise themselves as autonomous beings” (Hayles 1999:286).

If posthumanism is preparing for a post-biological future that has transcended the inconvenience of immanent corporeality through technological intervention, what kind of aesthetics suit it best? The role of the visual and imaging technologies in the construction and realisation of posthuman aesthetics cannot be overstated or over-emphasised. Elaine Graham (2004:28) explains: “From the myth of Prometheus, the Jewish legend of the golem, the Gothic horror of Frankenstein’s monster, to contemporary postmodern science fiction, a gallery of fantastic creatures haunt Western myth, religion and literature.” Posthuman aesthetics and imaging technologies are intimately intertwined, with often quoted statements by visual culture theorists that “[m]odern life takes place onscreen” (Mirzoeff 1999:2) only accentuating the relation. The posthuman finds an opportune ally in the visual to codify its aesthetic signals of transcendence onto flickering screens everywhere. However, it first has to be established whether an aesthetic of transcendence is possible and if so, how it presents itself through the visual. In the discussion that follows, the trace of an aesthetic of transcendence is picked up in early twentieth-century Modernist art, after which it is correlated to the contemporary digital photography of Oleg Dou.

An aesthetic of transcendence: Malevich’s blank canvasses

Is an aesthetic of transcendence visually identifiable? Modernist art provides ample examples of attempts at creating an aesthetic of transcendence. In Modernism, the art movement that stretched roughly from 1860 to 1930, tenets of transcendence were firmly established through various forms of abstraction. As Mark Taylor (1992:52) explains in his comprehensive analysis of Modernism: “... the

³ Hans Moravec’s *Mind children: The future of robot and human intelligence* (1988) is often referred to.

⁴ See in this regard Joel Dinerstein’s “Technology and its discontents: On the verge of the posthuman” (2006) for a critical discussion on how certain trends of posthumanism perpetuates a Euro-centric and white privilege.

goal of [Modernism's] theoaesthetics is union with the Absolute or the Real ... Since this Absolute is universal, many artists insist it can be reached only through the activity of abstraction in which particularity and individuality are either negated or suppressed. Such abstraction is, in effect, a ritual of purification ... [a] return to the beginning”.

Abstraction, as implemented by the early Modernist, can be described as the lack of figuration or the limitation of figuration. Evidently it was thought that “abstraction is a breakthrough to a more essential language in which the principles and powers that rule the cosmos can be expressed more adequately” (Stoker 2008:96). It was in the hope that figuration, and in effect immanence, can be left behind or transcended that Modernism (through Cubism, Suprematism, Futurism, the Bauhaus and other prominent movements) strove to cleanse their canvasses of traces of figuration. Figuration was associated with the immanent material realm, the particular and individual, and the all too physical encounter of the everyday that is associated mostly with the vile masses. In the words of Malevich ([1927] 1968:20): “The worth of human beings resides in no sense in their material bodies.” It was the enviable task of the Modernist artists to create an aesthetic of transcendence to lead the way out of this worldly gutter, hence the birth of the avant-garde.

Modernism, as embodied in the avant-garde, embarked on a cleansing mania – a project that was obsessed with sanitising the canvas. Abstraction was the antiseptic and figuration the bacteria that caused the sepsis. The disinfected white canvas in particular became its emblem and was best personified by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich and his Suprematist art works. Through Malevich's purified canvasses, abstraction reached a level of infiniteness that had not been achieved before. “Malevich was concerned to generate a heightened consciousness which transcended the reality of everyday existence”, explains Christina Lodder (1996:133). Malevich ([1927] 1968:11) described his project as follows: “Two basic types of creation can be distinguished: one, initiated by the conscious mind, serves practical life, so-called, and deals with concrete visual phenomena; the other, stemming from the subconscious or superconscious mind, stands apart from all ‘practical utility’ and treats abstract visual phenomena.” In other words, the superconscious mind transcended the immanent practical life and addressed enlightened abstract visual phenomena. The superconscious mind unlocked hidden truths “of pure sensation” and Malevich called it Suprematist art. Malevich ([1927] 1968:68) described the event of his first Suprematist paintings (**fig. 2**) as follows:

When, in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field. The critics and, along with them, the public sighed, “Everything which we loved was lost. We are in a desert ... Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!”

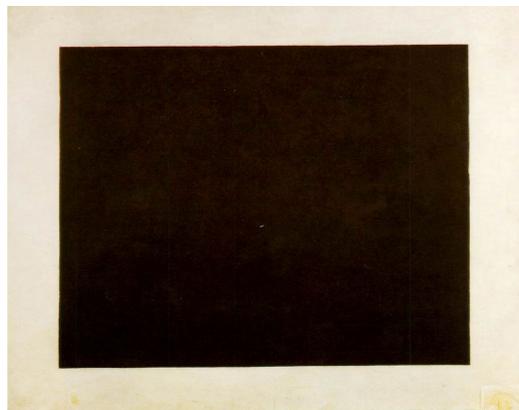


Figure 2: Kasimir Malevich, *Black Suprematistic Square* (1914-1915)
Oil on canvas, 79.6 x 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

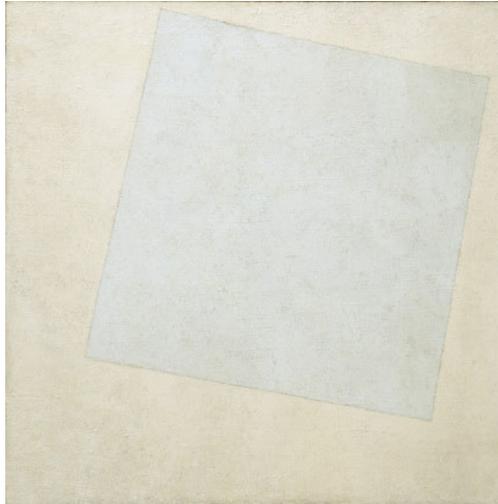


Figure 3: Kasimir Malevich, *White on White* (1918)
Museum of Modern Art, New York

The nothingness that his viewers and critics experienced at the time was experienced by Malevich in turn as the gateway to the Real. The only way to achieve this heightened state of reality was “to destroy any contact with an identifiable experience and to evoke a totally transrational experience” (Lodder 1996:133). This transrational space and the reality that Malevich created “defied the laws of gravity, perspective, stylistic coherence, common sense and logic” (Lodder 1996:133). The transrational is also associated with Malevich’s “commitment to the non-objective as a plausible framework for abstract painting” (Altieri 2009:15). Malevich ([1927] 1968:341) explained the non-objective as follows: “To the Suprematist, the appropriate means of representation is always one which gives the fullest possible expression to feelings as such and which ignores the familiar appearances of objects ... And such art arrives at non-objective representation.”

Malevich’s Suprematist endeavour culminated in the ‘ground zero’ of all abstraction, namely his famous ‘White on White’ series of 1917 and 1918. In these extremely barren works “[a]ll colour has been eliminated, and form in the purest, most de-humanized shape of the square has been reduced to the faintest pencilled outline” (Gray 1962:139). In “White on White” (1918) (**fig. 3**) the unframed canvas is barely distinguishable from its environment, while figuration is almost reduced to the mere existence of raw materials.

The aesthetics of transcendence had almost been accomplished, except for the minor inconvenience that the artwork still had to remain as a physical object. That was the one aspect of figuration or immanence Modernist abstraction could not overcome. Something tactile always had to remain to bear witness to the great abstraction and transcendence that had been achieved.

The posthuman aesthetics of transcendence: Dou’s naked faces

Russian-born photographer Oleg Duryagin (Oleg Dou for short) creates portraits for the future – what we might look like in 20 or 50 years’ time. He works with photographs that he digitally manipulates to create an almost classless, sexless and raceless universal face (**fig. 4**). He presents his audience with a blank canvas or rather the face of oblivion. Dou insists: “The persons presented in my works lack individuality: the eyebrows and the eyelashes are removed, the skin is smoothed” (CubeMe.com 2009). Dou, acclaimed by the International Photographer Awards in 2007 and 2008⁵, is not shy to shock and alarm his audience as he aims to create a ‘personal aesthetics’ (CubeMe.com 2009). The reason for his creation of these ‘porcelain zombies’, in all fairness to him, is however not to multiply the void but rather to refute the blankness. In other words, he is interested in the person inside and not the external veneer that is engineered to uphold the appearance. Most of his projects are “devoted to [the] relationship between [a] human’s inner world with [the] human’s behaviour in

⁵ Oleg Duryagin was acclaimed as the Nonprofessional Photographer of the Year 2007 in the Special Category at the IPA (International Photographer Awards) with his *Nuns* series. He also won the subcategory “Digitally Enhanced” for the same series. Dou further won the award for The Professional Photographer of the Year 2008 in the Fine Art Category at the IPA (International Photographer Awards) with his *Toy Stories* series.

society. The society still restricts [the] behaviour and thought of a human being” and Dou therefore sees his work as “a kind of a protest [...] to show that a person should remain who he is and that people should perceive him in the way he is” (Dou, quoted on Douart.ru 2010). His work is therefore an attempt to contrast the inner and outer worlds by de-emphasising the outer and its disproportioned importance in the culture of the screen. Dou is sincerely interested in what lies beneath surface phenomena.

As already mentioned, technically, Dou uses photographs as his source material, which he then digitally enhances and tweaks to create creatures that are more akin to posthuman beings than mere earthlings. In other words, he starts with the human and technologically intervenes to produce as end-products beings that transgress boundaries to become posthuman, beyond human, other than human.



Figure 4: Oleg Dou, *Neck 2* (Naked Faces series) (2006)
100x 100 cm, C-print under Diasec, Edition: 8

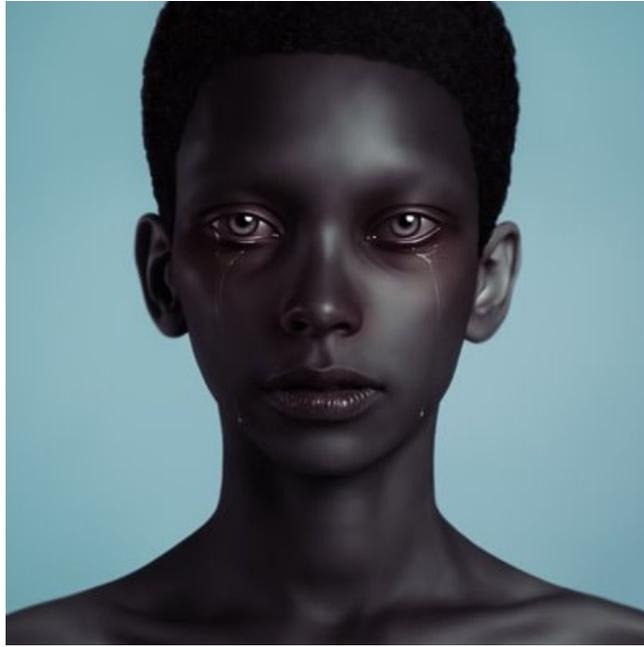


Figure 5: Oleg Dou, *Tanya's tears* (Tears series) (2008)
180x 180 cm/120 x 120 cm, C-print under Diasec, Edition: 8

The fact that most of his images are of women and girls refutes the sexless claim. Or is this perhaps because female flesh is more malleable than male flesh? However, the mere fact that Michael Jackson existed counters this notion because he became a posthuman to end all sexes, genders and races. Dou does depict black female faces (**fig. 5**) as well, although they appear more in the league of Caucasian airbrushed as black. I am therefore suggesting that despite its cleverness, the faces that Dou depicts cannot disembodied or de-signify their material signified completely. To phrase it in terms of the overall argument: the immanent signifier cannot be replaced in its entirety by a transcendental signified.

In Dou's digitally enhanced photographs the stripped surfaces of Modernist canvasses (Malevich's 'White on White') turn into the blank faces of his posthuman portraits. For example, for the series entitled 'Naked Faces' (2006) Dou created empty, clean, uncovered, essentialised and abstract portraits. The particularities and singularities of the faces have been reduced to the bare essentials or universalities of the human face, namely eyes, nose and mouth. Thus universally his portraits are still recognisable as human, yet they have been enhanced to eliminate particularities and embodied traits, or as one commentator observed: the human has been wrung out of them. As we stare into the eyes of Dou's posthuman portraits, we have the distinct sensation of descending into a void since Dou's aesthetic of transcendence tries too desperately to leave its medium behind. Compare for example Dou's *Albino* (2006) (**fig. 6**) with South African artist Pieter Hugo's 'Albino Portraits' (2003-2004) (**fig. 7**) and it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that Hugo's portraits stand closer to the embodied and the all too particular and immanent.



Figure 6: Oleg Dou, *Albino* (Naked Faces series) (2006)
100 x 100 cm, C-print under Diasec, Edition: 8



Figure 7: Pieter Hugo, *Lindi Msiza* (Albino Portraits) (2003)
112 x 93cm, archival pigment on cotton rag paper, Edition of 3 + 1 AP

However, if one compares Dou's 'Naked Faces' with Malevich's 'Self-portrait in Two Dimensions' (1915) or 'Woman Torso' (1929) (**fig. 8**) – similarly reduced to essentials and 'significant form' – it becomes clear that both these artists follow a regime of purification and simplification. As Zanoah Bia (2010) explains:

[Dou] works mostly on the human figure, and, in particular, the human face. This is the object of meticulous investigation and transformation for Duryagin, since his aim is to question post-human identity. All that is flesh goes through a kind of digital metamorphosis; it is erased, smoothed, and rendered to extreme precision. The finished portraits look very sculptural, non-human, surreal, and in many ways, you can see a transparency of the porcelain skin underlining the fragility of every portrait.

Interestingly, Dou presents his portraits mostly full frontal (in other words, we see the faces dead centre from the front). This is the most confrontational way of presenting the human face in art, historically speaking. 'Self-portrait at 28' (1500) (**fig. 9**) of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), a Northern Renaissance artist, is generally renowned for being the first full frontal self-portrait in art history. Dürer was able to complete this magnificent self-confrontation full frontally due to the development in mirror technology. This portrait was made possible by one of the first full-length mirrors – once again, the human and technology work together in creating a self-image that haunts, as is the case in Dou's work. The technological achievement of the full-frontal portrait also has other more psychological by-products. In a full-frontal portrait, no motion is indicated; all movement is frozen as the viewer is transfixed by the solemn gaze of not only Dürer's self-portrait but also Dou's faces. The effect of this full-frontal confrontation perhaps directs the viewer into the realm of the timeless, the motionless and the absolute.



Figure 8: Kasimir Malevich, *Woman Torso* (1929)
Oil on wood, 58 x 48 cm, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



Figure 9: Albrecht Dürer, *Self-portrait at 28* (1500)
Oil on panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany

The direction towards the absolute confirms Dou's interest in the essence behind the surface of the skin, the 'true' self shining through the porcelain skins that can barely contain or hide their interiors. As Malevich searched for a cosmic revelation to appear behind the recognisable and obvious, so Dou searches for the core of the human beyond the human – thus a type of posthumanity. In fact, in many instances we find a glimpse of the inside seeping through (**fig. 10, 11 & 12**). In some of the faces we see a fine line tearing across the face, a scar on the lip, the ear folded like a blanket into the self to

reveal the interior, the tongue protruding and small imperfections that expose a portal to another reality. As indicated earlier: for Dou, the “real” person is the one inside the body and it is this ‘inner truth’ that he tries to locate in his haunting portraits. Similarly, Malevich ([1927] 1968:67) confessed: “By Suprematism I mean the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art. To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless – the significant thing is feeling.” Malevich’s dismissal of the objective world and visual phenomena corresponds with Dou’s attempt to uncover the true face behind the superficial mask. In fact, Dou’s faces can be likened to puppets, mannequins and a masquerade that hide a deeper transcendent being beneath the surface. In this regard, both Malevich and Dou maintain an opposition between surface and depth, inside and outside, and immanent and transcendent. This opposition translates into an aesthetic of transcendence since it is the ordinary and particular, thus immanence, which have to be overcome in order to achieve the so-called fullness of infinity (in Malevich’s case) or techno-oblivion (in Dou’s case).



Figure 10: Oleg Dou, *Nun 2* (Nuns series) and detail of lip (2007)
100 x 100 cm, C-print under Diasec, Edition: 6



Figure 11: Oleg Dou, *Tie* (Freaks series) (2007)
100 x 100 cm, C-print under Diasec, Edition: 6



Figure 12: Oleg Dou, *Hear Yourself* (Naked Faces series) (2006)
100 x 100 cm, C-print under Diasec, Edition: 8

Works consulted

- Agar, N 2007. Where to transhumanism? The literature reaches a critical mass. *Hastings Center Report* 37(3), 12–17.
- Altieri, C 2009. Why Modernist claims for autonomy matter. *Journal of Modern Literature* 32(3):1–21.
- Bia, Z 2010. Subliminal photographs. <http://www.egodesign.ca/img>.
- Dinerstein, J 2006. Technology and its discontents: On the verge of the posthuman. *American Quarterly*, 569–595.
- DOU. Oleg Duryagin. 2010. <http://www.douart.ru/>.
- Graham, E 2004. Post/human conditions. *Theology & Sexuality* 10(2), 10–32.
- Gray, C 1962. *The great experiment: Russian art, 1863–1922*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Hayles, K 1999. *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature and informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayles, K 2002. Flesh and metal: reconfiguring the mindbody in virtual environments. *Configurations* 10, 297–320.
- Hughes, J, Bostrom, N & Agar, N 2007. Human vs. posthuman. *The Hastings Center Report* 37(5), 4–9.
- Kurzweil, R 1999a. *The age of spiritual machines*. New York: Penguin.
- Kurzweil, R 1999b. Spiritual machines: The merging of man and machine. *The Futurist* 33(9), 16–29.
- Lodder, C 1996. The transrational in painting: Kazimir Malevich, alogism and zaum. *Forum for Modern Language Studies* xxxii(2), 119–136.
- Malevich, K 1968. *Essays on art 1915–1928*, vol. I. Trans. Glowacki-Prus, X & McMillin, A. Copenhagen: Borgen.
- Mirzoeff, N 1999. *An introduction to visual culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Moravec, H 1988. *Mind children: the future of robot and human intelligence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moravec, H 1998. The senses have no future, in J. Beckmann (ed.), *The virtual dimension: architecture, representation, and crash culture*, 84–95. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press.
- “Naked faces” portraits by Oleg Duryagin. 2009. CubeMe – Category: art, exhibition, latest, photography. <http://cubeme.com>.
- Stock, G 2002. *Redesigning humans: Our inevitable genetic future*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Stock, G 2004. From regenerative medicine to human design: what are we really afraid of? *Free Inquiry* 24(4), 27–38.
- Stoker, W 2008. The Rothko Chapel paintings and the “urgency of the transcendent experience”. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64(2), 89–102.
- Taylor, M 1992. *Disfiguring. Art, architecture, religion*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.