

Study on the Media Art Experiences and Technological Significance Based on Existential Phenomenology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Art has long served humanity, and as we progress towards a post-human society – characterized by advancements such as cyborgs, digital spirituality, digital death, digital double and artificial intelligence, art that incorporates technology plays an even more crucial role in navigating as well as shaping these new realities. In the context of this paper, technologically driven art is generalized as media art and functions as a bridge between human experiences and new forms of existence, offering a platform for dialogue and reflection.

Phenomenology offers a philosophical method to understand the interactions between human and their environment, emphasizing the existential experience and significance of being. Nevertheless, in the field of media art research, there remains a gap in discussions about interpreting the experience of media art and the meaning of being from an ontological perspective of the concept ‘existence’. There is still much to be fully grasped about how people find the meaning of existence in media art. Related studies include work by Don Ihde (2010), who updated traditional phenomenology to better explain how technology changes our experiences and perceptions, influencing our sense of reality in the digital era. Lagerkvist (2017) started a new area of study called existential media studies. In her seminal work on digital existence, she suggests examining how we are ‘thrown’ into our digital lives. She connects this idea to classical philosophical themes like death, time, and our relationships with the world and others, looking at everyday mediated interactions when we feel especially vulnerable. Steve Mann (2003) presents Existential Technology as a theoretical and technological framework for understanding our digital identity and challenges the systems that claim to offer us freedom. If we allow ourselves to think of media art showcases as equitable to tourist attractions, compete with dazzling digital displays and high-tech expos, Wang Ning’s (1999) systematic analysis of ‘authenticity’ within the tourist experience could be an interesting proposition relatable to the media art experience. For Ning, who built his proposition of existential authenticity on MacCannell, posited that the tourism activities which are characterized by strong motivation, which tourists engage with can prompt deep reflections; helping people to develop a realization of existence (often in an exotic environment) and form a ‘genuine’ connection with reality. This feeling of genuine existence can linger even beyond the moment of contact, as seen with souvenirs, postcards and photographs. He seeks to provide an interpretation of the authentic experience of travel, but we are likely to arrive at an understanding that user experience is an indispensable dimension in the study of media art aesthetic, much like it is in tourism studies.

This paper introduces a conceptual framework that situates media art as a means of facilitating existential encounters. Through a dualistic approach, it contrasts user interaction with reflection, the user with the exister, and the sensual experience with the existential realization. This framework acknowledges the complexity of digital thrownness—a Heideggerian term reinterpreted to signify the overwhelming experience of digital environments—and juxtaposes it with the deliberate engagement of users with the digital world.

2. DIGITAL THROWNNESS IN MEDIA ARTS

Thinking about media art as either purely motivational or authentic misses the point; it is more about exploring a complex and uncertain digital terrain. Art has always been meant to challenge our expectations and push us to unpredictability. Appreciating art involves using our perception to adjust our mental schema when our predictions are wrong, and the adjustment of ‘predictive error’ has an impact on the affective value we associate with art appreciation (Mortu, 2023). One seeming possibility in this direction is to be found in Lagerkvist’s definition of digital thrownness, which underlines the phenomenological uncertainties by being in the (digital) world. Following Sartre, uncertainty is key to the understanding of the absurdity of the world phenomenon. By acknowledging the intertwined nature of our being and technology in this era, media arts offer the phenomenological uncertainties in the digital world. An analysis of existential media henceforth must reconcile its foundational claims with the inherent “thrownness” of the digital age. Based on Heidegger, Lagerkvist's "thrownness" means encountering a world through media where we find ourselves in a specific place, at a specific time, among specific people, with the unavoidable task of engaging with and making sense of our unpredictable digital world. Lagerkvist posited that the subjective self matches the idea of the ‘exister’ echoing Karl Jasper’s philosophy (Lagerkvist, 2017). It is a self that existential philosophy is concerned with, who faces the absurdity he or she is thrown into albeit the agency and freewill.

Here I introduce a conceptual framework that situates media art as a means of facilitating existential encounters. Through a dualistic approach, it contrasts user interaction with reflection, the empirical user with the introspective exister, and the sensual experience with the existential realization. This framework acknowledges the complexity of digital thrownness—a Heideggerian term reinterpreted to signify the immersive and sometimes overwhelming experience of digital environments—and juxtaposes it with the deliberate engagement of users with the digital world. I focus on classical existential themes as eternal issues, but also on how these are evolving amidst the specific challenges of the modern digital age, encompassing both everyday life digital experience and the deliberate choice to experience media art by visiting a showcase, gallery or museum.

Figure 1. illustrates the concept of “digital thrownness” as an experience of being absurdly thrown into an existential situation through digital means or platforms. It outlines the sequential stages of an individual’s existential journey through the digital encounters:

1. Digital Existence: The initial stage where the exister is within the digital environment
2. Reflection & Interpretation: the exister reflects on and interprets this mode of existential
3. Existential Realization: The process leads to profound existential insights

Existential disruption is illustrated as an organic process that occurs during the journey represented by burst air bubbles. It represented the moments when the exister experience a predictive error, causing them to recalibrate their mental schema and leading to reflection and interpretation.



Figure 1. The concept of digital thrownness as an existential journey.

The table below highlights the dualistic nature of the two types of media art experiences, contrasting immediate sensory engagement of user interaction with the profound introspection or existential reflection. It also emphasizes the distinction between the role of the user as a participant and the exister as an introspective experiencer, as well as the difference between sensual experiences and existential realizations afforded by media art.

Table 1: Comparison table outlining the dualistic examination of media art experience

Aspects	Formalistic	Existential
User	Participant	Exister
User characteristic	Empirical, Experiential	Philosophical, introspective, reflective
User experience	Sensual	Revelatory, contemplative

2.1 DIGITAL THROWNNESS AS SYNTHETIC REASON FOR MEDIA ARTS

The section reveals the potential of media arts for existential exploration and self-reflection. By examining the aesthetics of existential media artworks, the framework offers a novel lens to understand how art and technology can coalesce into a medium for existential realization. This new aesthetic paradigm urges a reevaluation of the role of media arts, proposing that it can move beyond mere representation or narrative to become a means of accessing the deeper layers of the human condition in our increasingly digitized world.

To further elucidate how this framework can be used to analyze the meaning of media art, the work of Hsin-Chien Huang and Giang Nguyen exemplify two different approaches artists harness technology not only to enact aesthetic experiences but also to deepen existential reflection. By contrasting the sensory with the introspective, I demonstrates a new framework to examine the aesthetic and meaning of these artworks beyond their formality.

2.1.1 BEING SELF: SYNTHETIC REASONING TO PROVE SELF-EXISTENCE

Marshall McLuhan laid the foundation for understanding technology as an extension of man. This perspective underscores the purposeful nature of technological invention, highlighting how each new technology is designed with deliberate intent to augment human function (McLuhan, 1966). Steve Mann's approach to technology as a form of techno-capitalist in(ter)ventions highlights the dual potential of technology for personal empowerment and political subversion. Although his approach to Existential Technology intentionally diverges from classical existential philosophy by focusing on the experiential aspects rather than purely philosophical discourses, his seemingly useless apparatus embodies the spirit of existentialism; made to resist the utilitarian and functionalist constraints often imposed by techno-capitalist society (Mann, 2003). While Steve Mann's Existential Technology may not be rooted in the formal doctrines of existentialist philosophy, it reflects the core existentialist idea that individuals must actively create meaning through their actions. Taiwanese media artist Hsin-chien Huang echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of developing unique methods and interpretations when adopting new technologies (Huang, 2022). As he reminded, media artists should not merely follow the 'manual operation' provided by technology manufacturers but should instead adapt the technology to their needs and creative vision.

Hsin-chien Huang shared his thoughts about the role of technology in his art making, 'technology has become my arm, it transforms my body's movements into new textures/ skin and reconstructing a new physical-digital objects (when it is printed as 3D)' (Huang, 2022). In "The Sculptures of Touch" (Figure 2), Hsin-Chien Huang explores the concept of body memory from a particular era through a series of performative sculptures. Using motion capture devices attached to his body, similar to Steve Mann's early wearable technology, Huang aims to document his existence within a limited space. With one hand handcuffed to a fixed point, he restricts his movement, thereby recording his existence in a confined time-space, capturing the essence of his presence in that environment. The restricted movement imposed by the handcuffs symbolizes the existential confinement of the self, prompting the audience to reflect on the limitations of their own physical existence. This sensory engagement transitions into an existential realization as the viewer contemplates the tension between freedom and constraint, presence and absence, ephemeral and permanence.

In the case of "The Sculptures of Touch," the work is primarily about the artist's own expression, where Hsin-chien Huang uses his body as a medium to externalize his personal experience and introspection. The motion capture record becomes a revelatory evidence of his existential reflection, serving as a tangible manifestation of the deeper philosophical meanings embedded in the performance.

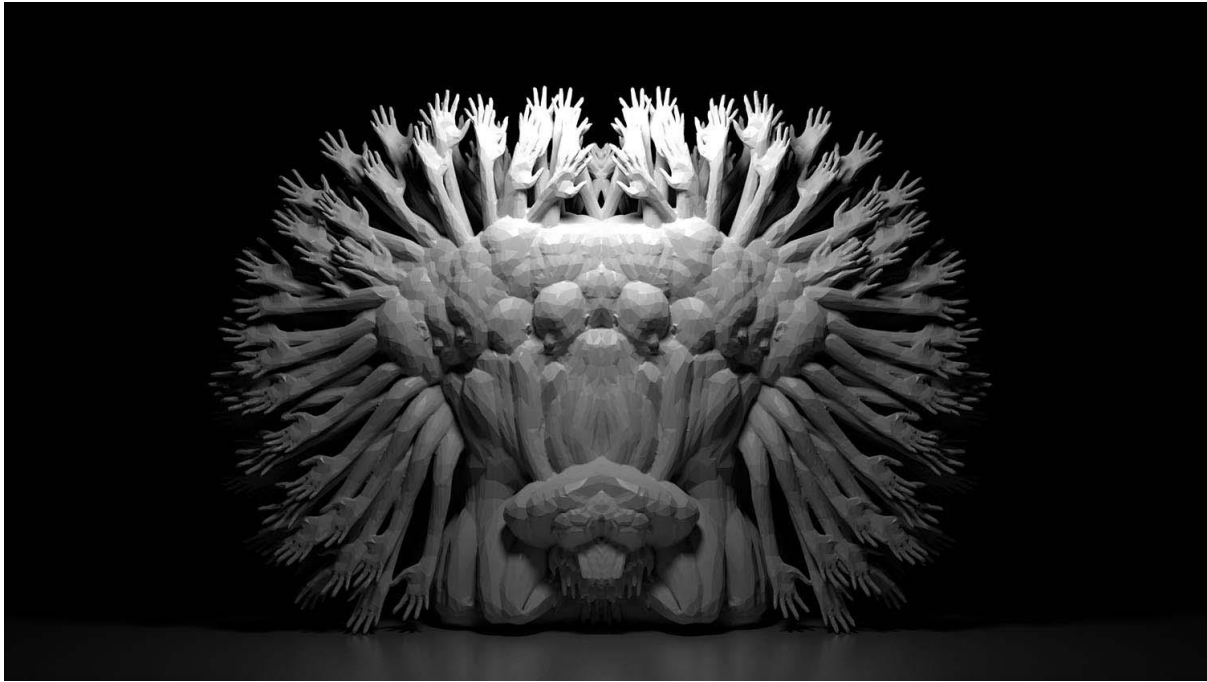


Figure 2. Hsin-Chien HUANG , *Sculpture of Touch: Handcuffs II*, 2022

2.1.2 BEING-IN-AND-WITH-THE-WORLD: SYNTHETIC REASONING TO PROVE SELF-EXISTENCE WITH THE OTHERS

In the digital age, the line between physical reality and virtual reality is becoming increasingly blurred, prompting us to ask: what does it mean to exist in a connected world. Our sense of self is now not only mediated and evolving but also quantified, distributed, analyzed and virtualized (Hayles, 1999). This complicates not only our understanding of existence but identity even further. Virtual presence requires us to rethink what it means to be a connected individual, existing both physically here and virtually there. Virtual presence refers to a sense of 'being there' in the cognition of the users mediated by the presence technology (Zhao, 2003). 'There' is nowhere; it is the 'non-place', not for tangible material but bits of data – an imaginary space (Urry, 2010). In Turkle's way of looking at this model of presence, 'there is no "me," no "I," no unitary actor (Turkle, 2005). There is only a "decentralized" self,' she said. Under such conditions where the virtual world overlaps with the physical world, we have to shift the focus of our consciousness from one space to another as we 'move' from one space to another. Digital existence challenges clear boundaries between here and there, making us believe we will always connect with someone else at the other end of a fibre optic line. This blurs the distinction between absence and presence in modern media life, as signals of our existence are no longer tied to our physical bodies.

In our complex realities, where the digital mediation of the presence is not just ubiquitous but inevitable, we are witnessing a behavioural pattern of 'brushing presence' exhibited by media users. This behaviour also reflects the participatory dynamics within the performativity of media arts. Originating from contemporary Chinese digital culture, which is now a global phenomenon, "刷存在感" (shuā cúnzàigǎn), which translates roughly to "brushing presence", or "making one's presence felt," has become a significant motivation behind user mediation.

Artists working with technology channel this mediation as a source of inspiration, creating works that serve as mirrors to prompt users—redefined here as “existers” – to embark on journeys of self-reflection and existential inquiry. Within this context, reflectivity becomes an emergent characteristic of media art, a dimension where art and technology converge to invite a deeper examination of existence. Going forward, I will be using the term “exister” to refer to the user when engaging in a phenomenological approach.

In his attempt to allow netizen to seek existential reflection and to make sense of human connection, Vietnamese media artist Giang Nguyen initiated memosto.us project (Figure 3) to connect Internet existers through a chain of digital postcards. Strangers can send a message on a digital postcard to a future recipient and receive digital postcards sent by someone in the past, effectively subverting the linearity of time. The only way existers can identify the existence of another person at the other end is through the name, the timestamp that proves their existence, and the feelings expressed in the message. However, once the postcard is received, they can never communicate with that person again. This project makes the seemingly absurd concept of digital thrownness in a virtual space, where anonymous individuals seek solace together, meaningful.

Resonating with Turkle's concept of "Alone Together," the memosto.us project exemplifies the phenomenon of the networked self—individuals who are physically isolated yet find solidarity in the cyber world. This epitomizes the idea of being together while not truly being together. In today's world, people often lack real connections and genuine conversations, despite being physically present with others. This project highlights the disembodied lifestyle perpetuated by our networked connectivity, where digital interactions replace meaningful, face-to-face connections.

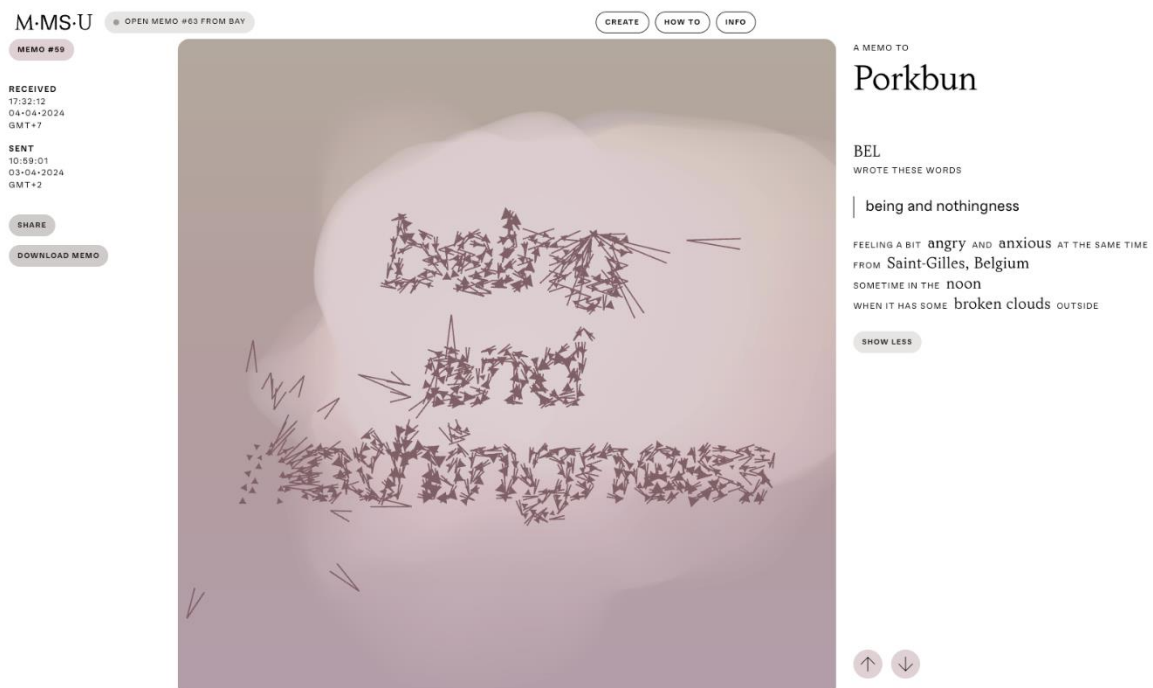


Figure 3. Giang Nguyen, <https://memosto.us/>, 2024

This project underscores the importance of existential experiences in creating genuine connections. Ning's idea emphasizes the physical souvenirs as tokens of existence, while

Giang's digital postcards serve as ephemeral yet profound markers of human interaction in the digital age. By subverting traditional notions of time and presence, the digital travelling in cyberspace offered by memosto.us epitomizes an absurd digital thrownness, and offers a way for existers to reflect on human existential conditions in the digital terrain. As the existers reflect on the anonymity and temporality of these interactions, the work unveils the deeper existential layers in the digital world. The absence of a direct connection between the senders and receivers forces the existers to confront the concept of digital thrownness – being thrust into a virtual interaction with no control over the outcome. This framework helps us to understand how the memosto.us project transforms a seemingly simple ping into a philosophical meditation on presence, absence and digital mediation of human connection.

3. CONCLUSION

Artists working at the nexus of art and technology channel this mediation as a source of inspiration, creating works that serve as mirrors to prompt users, redefined here as “existers” – to embark on journeys of self-reflection and existential inquiry. Within this context, reflectivity is not a passive property but an emergent characteristic of media arts, a dimension where art and technology converge to invite a deeper examination of existence.

Both works exemplify how media art can transcend the formal aesthetic and sensory, provoking introspection and existential inquiry. The synthetic reason both Huang and Giang used to produce the artwork suggests that media arts, particularly when analyzed through the lens of existential phenomenology, could become a medium through which existers can explore and reflect on fundamental aspects of human existence. Both their works challenges our mental schemas, as seen in the concept of digital thrownness. The unpredictability of nature of their works, much like the unpredictability of life, forces us to adjust our perceptions which often leads to a recalibration of our presence awareness.

The paper suggests that media arts can serve as a bridge between digital engagement and existential thought, revealing the potential for it to shape not only aesthetic experiences but also the introspection of the self. By examining the aesthetics of existential media projects and artworks, the framework offers a novel lens to understand how art and technology can coalesce into a medium for existential realization. This new aesthetic paradigm urges a reevaluation of the role of media arts, proposing that it can move beyond mere representation or narrative to become a means of accessing and reflecting on the deeper layers of the human condition in our increasingly digitized world.

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