

Transcription of the Podcast:

## Probing the Digital: Cyborgs, Avatars and AI

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### Experts

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Philosophy Professor at John Cabot University Rome, Italy.

**Darja Popolitova,**

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### Moderator

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### Note

This transcription has been edited to make it more readable.

### Abstract

In this captivating podcast discussion, experts delve into the profound implications of posthuman technologies like cyborgs, avatars, and AI on society and philosophy. They explore issues of technology inequality, the reshaping of human identity in the era of cyborgs, and the societal influence on AI's future.

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner calls for a responsible approach to posthuman tech, challenging conventional dualistic views of humanity and highlighting the adaptability of humans to technological enhancements. Marc Ries stresses the importance of maintaining distinctions between humans and cyborgs, emphasising the intricate nature of identity. Daria Popolitova shares her creative process involving digital selves and the ethical considerations of their impact on art.

The discussion highlights the intersection of politics and technology, urging reflection on access, equality, and ethical dimensions in the evolving landscape of posthuman technologies. In the final segments, the dialogue critiques utopian ideals like mind uploading to reach immortality, advocating for a focus on real-world challenges related to AI, cyborgs, and digitalisation. The panellists emphasise power dynamics, privacy, and data ownership. The

conversation encourages a shift from utopian thinking toward a nuanced understanding of the complexities of AI and cyborg technologies and their impact on society and politics. The discourse also explores the influence of data and AI on art, particularly in the context of NFTs and the digital art market. The panellists discuss the significance of data in art, authentication through blockchain technology, and the challenges of standardising digital art. The final part contemplates the posthuman future, discussing the coexistence of digital and physical art forms, technology's role in shaping human bodies and aesthetics, and the concept of posthuman existence with multiple identities. The dialogue concludes positively, emphasising the importance of embracing complexity and interconnectedness in the digital age. It offers hope and gratitude to listeners amidst ongoing technological transformations.

## Transcription of the Podcast

[00:00:00.200] - Dietmar Koering

Welcome to our podcast *Probing the Digital: Cyborgs, Avatars and AI*, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture's podcast on posthumanism at the Art Academy of Latvia. Today, we are talking about cyborgs, avatars and AI, and we would like to ask how cyborgs and avatars embody contemporary forms of human existence in digital and hybrid spaces. What does this mean for artists, designers, and architects today? And how does it affect our future? Recent developments in technology require more than ever a reconsideration of the perceptual, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of the interconnections of human subjects, technologies, and digital media.

I'm Dietmar Koering, architect, and I'm pleased to introduce my co-host, Eva Sommeregger, architect, and Sebastian Muehl, art historian. We are senior researchers at the LMDA Institute within the Art Academy of Latvia. Hello, Eva. Hello, Sebastian.

[00:01:14.600] - Eva Sommeregger

Hi, Dietmar.

[00:01:16.220] - Sebastian Muehl

Hello, Dietmar. Many thanks to our listeners, we hope you enjoy listening. I would like to thank the Baltic German University Liaison Office for their financial support and I'll hand over to Eva, who will introduce our very exciting guests for today.

[00:01:40.780] - Eva Sommeregger

A very warm welcome to our three guests. Today, we have the artist and researcher Darja Popolitova from the Estonian Academy of Arts.

[00:01:53.530] - Darja Popolitova

Hello.

[00:01:54.270] - Eva Sommeregger

We have the media theorist Marc Ries from the Offenbach University of Art and Design.

[00:02:00.050] - Marc Ries

Hi.

[00:02:00.660] - Eva Sommeregger

And a warm welcome to Stefan Sorgner from the John Cabot University of Rome.

[00:02:06.860] - Stefan Sorgner

My great pleasure being here.

[00:02:08.850] - Eva Sommeregger

I'm delighted that you're all with us today. Let's start with the first question, Dietmar, shall we?

[00:02:15.500] - Dietmar Koering

Yes, great. I would like to start with the question that interests me most, and that is about the societal impact of posthuman technologies and inequality. Stefan, how will the development of posthuman technologies impact society? Will there be an acceleration of existing inequalities as some individuals gain access to enhancements while others do not? And how can we ensure that these technologies are distributed fairly and equitably?

[00:02:48.450] - Stefan Sorgner

Posthuman technologies, what exactly do you have in mind? I mean, posthuman technologies could be anything because the posthuman discourse actually addresses a great variety of emerging technologies. Though there are not really specific posthuman technologies. Maybe one could say that the ones which really alter our being, which particularly target us as human beings, would be gene technologies, brain-computer interfaces, as well as AI and digitalisation. The issue of equality is definitely the central issue which needs to be addressed. In the history of reflections it was addressed, both by *Brave New World*, the famous novel which led to a multiclass society, and [...] in the movie *Gattaca*, which [depicted a] split in society. The issue is also currently again addressed, because it's a severe worry that we will lead up to a hierarchisation of society. But actually, when looking at what has happened during

the COVID pandemic, we can see that this is not all which is at stake. One could wonder whether it would be Switzerland and the Silicon Valley which really benefit most from the new technologies. What we saw when the new vaccines were developed, [was that] the first who got hold of them were not necessarily the ones who benefited most. This is because at the beginning, it was an open question whether the [vaccines] were effective or had severe side effects. It later came out that the ones who got hold of AstraZeneca at the beginning were those who had to deal with severe side effects in very rare circumstances. [...] Young people, in particular women, died from side effects, and they would probably not have died if they had only caught COVID. This is just an additional thing to consider: The first ones to benefit from a new technology must take the risks associated with that new technology. Maybe just to finish up the thought: Once we have realised that something is very beneficial [and] of general advantage, then it's simply a political issue. We need to make sure and fight that a sufficient number of people get hold of a new technology. But that's a political enterprise.

[00:05:19.240] - Dietmar Koering

Interesting. I mean, this political question is very important, which is why I also address it later to Marc. But one thing is that you have talked about cyborgs and that human beings are cyborgs already. Talking about the vaccine example, how do you see that not every update is then always a successful one? Is there, let's say, an electronic test phase somehow? Or how do you relate the idea of cyborgs to posthuman technologies?

[00:05:51.030] - Stefan Sorgner

The cyborg, firstly, is a new understanding of who we are as human beings. It breaks with the traditional dualistic concept of humans consisting of an immaterial mind, a soul, a divine spark, and the material body. And here the cyborg stands for a non-dualistic figure. And that also means, well, that between technology and our nature – our bodily nature – there's no categorical separation, but technologies have always been a part of who we are. Language is such a technology. And if we understand that we as humans are techno-natural creatures, that also means that maybe we should be more open to the latest technologies and developments. Maybe playing around with the genes is not necessarily something so problematic because it's simply in tune with what we've always been doing as human beings. We've developed new technologies, incorporated them, used them, and took the ones which are useful to us. And if something doesn't work, we simply need to get rid of it and be careful enough that it doesn't wipe out humanity.

[00:07:04.600] - Dietmar Koering

Thank you, it's quite clear. I also would like to come back to the point that I mentioned before, or you mentioned it already, Marc, ... the politics. If we talk about politics, we also talk about society. To which society – or maybe to which politics – is AI an answer?

[00:07:25.890] - Marc Ries

That is the question of Armin Nassehi in his book *Patterns*. The answer isn't very simple because I think that the problems are not only technical ones or technological ones, but also structural ones, political ones, institutional ones, and perhaps also ontological ones. I don't feel so good when hearing that we are now all becoming cyborgs because I think that it [is] very important to make a difference. We are, from

our disposition, always aware of creating necessary differences, in order to not mix everything and get a whole universe of everything as the same. As if everybody is becoming a cyborg and so we are advancing a wholly [new] future. I think it's very important to say that cyborgs, this new technological, or avatar, being is a really interesting topic, but I also think that it is something really different to what humans are. I think we have to agree that there [are] different ontological divisions. One division may be called cyborg, but another one stays a human entity. That's for the first answer.

[00:09:12.550] - Dietmar Koering

I mean, one point is then if you talk about humanity, what we mentioned quite often is the term of identity. How do you see this term, for example, if we compare it to art? Nowadays we have modern techniques, GAN networks, which might generate images from prompts. I think what you've mentioned is that the history [and identity] of such generated images is missing, right?

[00:09:58.500] - Marc Ries

Coming back to the identity question, I think that's a really important topic in modernity. Since the beginning of the enlightenment, you have this very important idea of identity. But that's a social construction, it's an institutional innovation, in modern societies, to put a claim on identities. But what is an identity?

[00:10:24.930] - Dietmar Koering

The reason for the question is also that I am interested in the artistic integration of advanced technologies. If I ask you, Darja: We have talked about cyborgs, avatars, and artificial intelligence. In your

work, I see an impact in the way you create your work and jewellery. There is a certain perception and interpretation of how you use these digital techniques in your art. My question is, what are the implications for you – and your work – with regards to the concepts of artistic expression and creativity?

[00:11:09.160] - Darja Popolitova

I think you are talking about the fictional character [of Serafita], the jewellery, the set-up with her and how I implement her into my exhibitions. Since [Serafita] is mediated through screens all the time, we probably need to speak about the digital self, if we want to continue the discussion about identity. What is a digital self, what is a real self, and how are we communicating [them]? Usually, we communicate the digital self via likes, posts, and various activities on social media. We can say then that [Serafita] is an avatar because avatars [...] enhance your physical capabilities. In this sense, Serafita is informed from the internet culture. There are some stylistic elements to her, she's enhanced, she's tuned, she's like an empowered figure in this sense. Yes, we can think about her as a proxy, as an alter ego for my creative activity. She's an important element in my creative practice that helps me to enhance the functionality of the jewellery, to create a narrative and a story about the conventional objects surrounding us.

[00:13:07.540] - Stefan Sorgner

But I mean, is she a part of you, would you say that?

[00:13:11.720] - Darja Popolitova

It's definitely a prolongation.

[00:13:16.220] - Stefan Sorgner

So if someone hurts your alter ego, or offended her?

[00:13:22.420] - Darja Popolitova

Then I will be offended, too.

[00:13:24.740] - Dietmar Koering

That's a very interesting question. You have this avatar, the jewellery witch, and of course, she's created by you and there is a connection. But is that a connection where the avatar is out there and also protects you? Is it a personal connection in the sense of a symbiosis between you and the avatar? The reason [why I'm asking it] is [that] we have talked earlier about personhood and identity, and in a world where the boundaries between human, machine, and AI become increasingly blurred, what ethical considerations arise in such a situation? I think the avatar you created is a wonderful example for that.

[00:14:18.210] - Darja Popolitova

[You wonder] why I chose a different name [for her], why she's not Darja Popolitova, but ... Serafita? It's because ... I still want this distance a bit. [It's also] because she was touching upon some political topics, and I just wanted to protect myself through the other name. In a way, she is a part of me, but she is also a curated part of me.

[00:14:48.440] - Eva Sommeregger

I think it's very interesting that you say that she is a mediated figure. She is mediated through the screen. She talks to us through a screen, but maybe she also becomes a projection surface from your part. In this sense, I would like to ask whether you could expand on how visual experiences can be perceived in different ways. You were saying before that they can

be multisensory. Could you expand on that and explain what haptic visuality is?

[00:15:26.770] - Darja Popolitova

I was particularly interested in jewellery because usually – as an exhibition artefact – it's really small and attached to a pedestal or plinth. But if you mediate jewellery through big 4K screens, my hypothesis is that it does something totally different to your perception. That's where the magic, the ritual, comes into play. Because people are used to seeing powers in objects, whether it is a church or some [other] mysterious context. We are used to believing that objects can heal us or change our physicality, even only by watching them, without touching them. There are similarities to what screens can do to us – without the actual contact between skin and object. That's what I'm interested in, the ephemeral. But actually jewellery is still really physical.

[00:16:40.840] - Dietmar Koering

[Let me ask you, Stefan:] I think we are pretty sure that at the moment there's no possibility that we can transfer a certain consciousness, or human consciousness, to a machine or avatar. So [the avatar] is a representation of us, with maybe certain feelings and a use function. But the question related to the idea of the post-human is whether at some point in the future we could transfer our consciousness to what you mentioned earlier as silicon-based entities, instead of human, carbon-based entities?

[00:17:29.940] - Stefan Sorgner

I mean, that has been discussed quite intensely, in particular in Silicon Valley. People like Ray Kurzweil, who's the visionary futurist here, got employed by Google, and Google pays him loads of money. His idea

is that in 20, 30 years time, it's realistic that our personalities can be placed onto a hard drive. I don't know whether it's optimistic, pessimistic, or anything, but I don't think it's realistic. We don't have any indication that something like a personality, that what we are, can actually be moved from a carbon base to a silicon base. Because we would need to capture all aspects of our personality, which then get digitised. But what would that mean? It's not just about our personality, it would also have to include, for instance, the possibility to play tennis. If someone plays tennis, that's part of their personality. How should all of that work? Isn't that part of a more bodily capacity? Isn't that an embodied capacity? Should you still be able to play tennis if you're an uploaded mind? There are many other reasons why I think this is not a realistic option, because we don't even have a digital living entity, which is the first prerequisite for developing further stages. Then we would need to have a conscious entity, a self-conscious entity, and so on. I think we're very far away from that. And Kurzweil just tells the story in order to get into the media, and everyone talks about it. I know my students love [these stories] as well because they watch *Black Mirror* and *Transcendence*, the movies. It's a fascinating idea, but it's not a realistic option.

[00:19:25.730] - Dietmar Koering

Okay. Probably it's science fiction and one of the reasons why it's so much in the media is because everybody is fascinated by it. But Marc: I think you mentioned at some point that the brain needs to have a body. What happens if the body doesn't work properly?

[00:19:48.740] - Marc Ries

I think there are multiple important applications of AI at the moment, in the medicines, but also in therapeutic contexts. On the other hand, I often ask myself, what kind of psycho Kurzweil really is. He's a priest, he's on a mission, and he wants a totally new kind of being which has nothing to do with himself. I always wondered why he is so unsatisfied with his own body, with his becoming a human, being a baby, growing older, etc. What is the stress he has with himself as a human? Otherwise, masses of people are fascinated, even obsessed with general AI. From a sociological point of view, I argue that this has a lot to do with compensation. To compensate for a shitty life within society, within your family, your relations, with yourself. You compensate for all that. It's some kind of escapism. It's a very old theory, I know, escaping, creating flight lines, if you like, out of reality, out of the reality principle, in direction of the pleasure principle, if I talk psychoanalysis. That is for me a very important point, compensation and escapism concerning AI applications.

[00:21:38.100] - Stefan Sorgner

Maybe without necessarily defending Kurzweil, because I am extremely critical of this mind-uploading option... However, I must say, he personally had some diabetes, or some severe diseases. Then he changed his diet and got a personal physician who provided him with hundreds of drugs every day. He actually managed to cure himself of diabetes. It got better, and he got much older than he expected to be because of some other diseases. [...] This is why he sets high hopes in the realisation of these technologies. However, I think with AI, and digitalisation, he simply goes one step too far. But the idea of trying to do your best in order to have an increased lifespan, that's something I'm aiming for as well. I wouldn't mind this. Even if I was to become 70, 80, I don't know... I saw my grandmother at the age

of 95, and she was always still looking forward to the next *Elisenlebkuchen*. There's always something to look forward to the next day. If you're healthy, if you're fine, then most people don't want to die.

[00:23:10.730] - Marc Ries

But you have to die.

[00:23:12.440] - Stefan Sorgner

You have to die. I agree. That's important.

[00:23:18.310] - Dietmar Koering

Maybe that might be our common point. However, if we refer to Harari, he argues that a certain group of people might strive for an eternal life somehow, and this would still exclude 99% of the rest of humanity.

[00:23:36.800] - Stefan Sorgner

That's really utter bullshit. Seriously, this [idea of worldly immortality] is not what any serious thinker should even consider. Immortality means that either you are unable to die, or you don't have to die. But that means not in a million years, not [even] in a billion years. Let's take the evolution of the universe: You have the Big Bang, the expansion of the universe. Eventually, it might come to a standstill or to a contraction of the universe, which leads to a cosmological singularity. But then [immortal] humans would still have to survive that. I mean, come on. Even if you're an uploaded mind, even if that worked out, it's not a realistic option. We are not going to be immortal.

[00:24:24.010] - Dietmar Koering

Okay, so you disagree with Harari.

[00:24:24.760] - Stefan Sorgner

Just forget about it. I can't take him seriously if he really means that.

[00:24:33.670] - Dietmar Koering

I think it's somehow inhuman, too. On the other hand, however, Harari helps to point to the problems which might arise if we don't take ethical actions today. Therefore, I think he draws on a dystopian future for which we shouldn't aim for.

[00:24:49.460] - Stefan Sorgner

No, we shouldn't talk about immortality at all. We can talk about an expanded lifespan, or health span. I think it's great that we basically doubled our life expectancy all over the world. I think that's a wonderful achievement. However, immortality is simply not a realistic option.

[00:25:08.360] – Sebastian Muehl

Taking up on the discussion on mind uploading and immortality as a utopia Kurzweil and other thinkers dream about, I do think that we are ending up in utopianism and the actual problems that utopianism always brought with it. Because immortality... What would that mean? It would actually mean a super boring life, in eternity, with no differences. You wouldn't have any change, any transformation, because you already assume an eternal state, and that is both contradictory and boring. I think when talking about artificial intelligence and the figure of the cyborg, we should indeed get rid of utopianism and talk a little bit more about critical aspects that are related to that, like power relations and the use of artificial intelligence or cyborg technologies in our actual societies.

[00:26:50.680] - Stefan Sorgner

Maybe one explanation could be more sociological. Why do people use the term immortality? [One aspect is that] it simply seems to work. These people from Oxford University who talk about superintelligence, or mind uploading, would end up being on the cover of the big magazines, *The New Yorker*, or *The Times*. Everyone's talking about them, because it seems to create a resonance for many people. It seems to affect people's ideas, wishes, and dreams. But that's strategically, it makes sense to them: they get into the media and that's why they talk about it. But really, I agree with you: the real issues when it comes to digitalisation are power issues, the meaning of digital data, [the question] who gets hold of which data, and privacy issues. This is what is really pressing today, unlike the coming of superintelligence.

[00:27:57.240] - Dietmar Koering

Okay, by power relations, you both refer to society and politics. Maybe you, Marc, can answer this again, to which politics AI might then be an answer.

[00:28:19.310] - Marc Ries

As in my topic, I'm looking into what Castoriadis has called the radical imaginary which constitutes society. To look into the digital imaginary then means to ask what kind of power is hidden behind the everyday use of technology, of AI technology. What kind of imaginary power is there? I have proposed two or three ideas around this power. One thing is surely that it's a really, really big joy to play God. You have the possibility – as a human being – to have some tools, and to [create] a whole universe with them. You can create avatars, or strange pictures, by only saying one sentence, as if "I would like to have this, this, or that". That's playing God. But it's really a new thing



because in the past, there were only very few people who could play God. [There were] the leaders playing God, or the priests playing God, but not everyone. Today, with mass culture, and popular culture, you have really interesting facets of actual God playing strategies. That's one imaginary behind all things digital. But in general, it would be wrong to assume that politics is obsessed with digital transformation, because there are other problems, too, not only those related to digital transformation.

[00:30:17.200] - Stefan Sorgner

For sure.

[00:30:18.000] - Marc Ries

For instance, climate problems, social injustice, and others, are often hidden behind the great question of digital transformation. It blends us easily.

[00:30:32.690] - Dietmar Koering

At least in the media, quite often, AI is referred to as the white knight who comes down to rescue us. Interestingly, in Germany, if we talk about AI, the first question that arises is data protection. Take the data generated by AI, for example, if I use a prompts generator, and create an image: is this now my image or does it belong to a company? There is no AI without data. And when you are talking about politics, we need to raise the question where the data comes from. How do we protect them? There are certain initiatives from the EU, but in general, Stefan, you know better than I that data is sourced and used in America and China, and not really in Europe.

[00:31:47.010] - Stefan Sorgner

At least it's very difficult in Europe to collect data in a comprehensive manner, because of the General Data

Protection Regulations (GDPR). That's the reason why BioNTech, the company that developed one of the vaccines, just moved their headquarters to London, where they can get hold of all the data they need to develop new cancer treatments. That's just one example that shows the incredible relevance of having the data in order to develop new medicines. But it doesn't only fall into this category. It also applies to policy making, natural sciences, social sciences, research, the development of new technologies, or engineering. Data is the new oil, and that's a valid, very important insight. I think... before we can promote any social justice today, or have universal health insurance, the money first needs to come in. If the money cannot be made – or if it can only be made in the US and in China, and even more in China – it will have consequences for all of us. It will first affect the middle class whose wealth will go down. When they are dissatisfied, they will be looking for a scapegoat. The scapegoats are the foreigners, the others, those who think differently, and that will lead to increased societal tensions. That is the prospect if we take the notion of data being the new oil seriously, and that worries me immensely. I think that's why we need to rethink the meaning of digital data.

[00:33:29.220] - Dietmar Koering

I totally agree. So let me ask you, Darja, how does data play a role in your work? Probably it's on a totally different level? How do you perceive data and how do you use it in your artworks?

[00:33:50.680] - Darja Popolitova

I will speak from another perspective. Part of my teaching in the jewellery department of the Estonian Academy of Arts is a course where I teach to create augmented reality filters for Instagram as part of

wearable digital jewellery. We all know these face filters. We create them and upload them to Instagram. The problem is that they become capitalised. How do we escape this? How do we differ from millions of filters that are uploaded by regular users? How do we escape standardisation? This topic is interesting, because we are stretching the idea of jewellery, its physicality, as a raw, substantial material object. How do you wear it and what about the performativity of all this? I call them jewelfies, it's like selfies with jewellery, because the performative aspect is part of the demonstration of the piece. All these questions are very important.

[00:35:19.860] - Dietmar Koering

So, you upload the pictures of your artwork to Instagram, and there it gets capitalised. But I assume not by you.

[00:35:27.900] - Darja Popolitova

It's something that belongs to Meta.

[00:35:31.680] - Dietmar Koering

Okay, but you still own it in terms of identity.

[00:35:36.340] - Darja Popolitova

Somehow, but it can be used and downloaded by anyone, and you don't know what are the further applications of it. It's the old question about authorship.

[00:36:00.960] - Dietmar Koering

Absolutely. I think a few years ago, AI was somehow a topic that plenty of people thought of as a distant future technology. The term itself was coined in 1956, at the Dartmouth Conference. Nevertheless,

nowadays, when I open my smartphone, there is an AI doing the job for me. Social media platforms are using AI when they're connecting new friends. Of course, you have platforms for news, which also select and browse certain topics, and it's an AI that selects what you're going to read. You're in a bubble. Then again, it's also a question how you perceive the data. Maybe I can ask this question to you, Marc, or to you, Sebastian, when it comes to current practices in art. When I produce work based on pre-selected filters or sorted by AI, how does this affect the work? Are there artists who work on that?

[00:37:28.760] - Marc Ries

Just a few remarks concerning big data. I always feel the need to ask what kind of data do you actually mean? Because there are so many different kinds of data. You have medical data, image data, audio data. You have a huge range of different types of data. What are we talking about here? If we are talking about art and [...] working, or experimenting with data, the question is important, what kind of data are we talking about?

[00:38:07.590] - Stefan Sorgner

That's where the NFTs come in. It's a way to protect, maybe even create a posthuman aura and the uniqueness of an artwork because you can attach a digital signature, for instance, to a 3D design of a ring – and you demonstrate that this is part of the blockchain, that it has been uploaded by you, that you are the inventor, and that you can always demonstrate your authorship. That's one of the possibilities to create a new posthuman aura in the case of digital art, as it represents uniqueness and authorship. And then clearly it aligns it with the one who's created that specific work.

[00:38:51.650] - Dietmar Koering

Yes.

[00:38:52.720] - Darja Popolitova

For me, the problem with NFTs, and the platforms where you exhibit NFT works, is that there are a lot of random works. It's a question of the platform, too, because when we want to make a difference between good or bad NFTs, what are the criteria to apply? There was an NFT out of which were produced hundreds and hundreds of examples, but indeed it was just a generic animal [picture]. I don't think that there was artistic value in it. It was just that motor that produced variation.

[00:39:56.630] - Dietmar Koering

Okay. But I mean, NFTs have been on the market for four or five years now, even more.

[00:40:04.700] - Stefan Sorgner

They came about with the Blockchain, and in particular with Ethereum. It happened just in the past couple of years. It clearly associates someone with the authorship, and then, later on, for the collectors, with the ownership of a specific artwork. You can see that work in the blockchain. It's your work of art. You're the owner, you're directly connected to the artist who produced it. Then, as you can now expand into some kind of metaverse, you start to have your own digital property – and the digital property, in the meantime, actually has become as expensive as real property. People have bought the house close to Puff Daddy's house in Beverly Hills because Puff Daddy gave concerts there. Then companies bought the houses close to Puff Daddy's because there were like 500 people every week to the concert. So people who put up advertisements buy the houses nearby, as a

way to do advertisement. I can see why it's working, why people are using that. In principle, one thing which is particular is who owns the platform – and the platform owners are those who are really having an overview, surveillance, and a lot of financial power. There are many challenging issues... You want to look good on Instagram, you want to look cool, so you buy yourself a digital Truse, which is an NFT, or a [digital] Birkin bag. The Birkin bags in real life cost €20,000-25,000, but you can also get a digital Birkin bag. With the real Birkin bag, you go out and people might think [that] it's false. But with the NFT Birkin bag, you can present that on Instagram. You can scroll over the image and it directly demonstrates that it's a real one because it's verified in the blockchain. I can understand the ones who have too much money and want to use these means as a way of further social distinction.

[00:42:30.890] - Dietmar Koering

However, coming back to the point [where we were] talking about digital platforms [and] where we navigate as avatars. Sebastian, you mentioned the metaverse project has been closed by Mark Zuckerberg.

[00:42:57.770] - Sebastian Mühl

That's what the news says. I'm not in touch with Zuckerberg, but I think there has been a reluctance not least by the Facebook community and also by businesses to go ahead with the [Facebook version of] metaverse. But that doesn't mean that there won't be different metaverse projects to exist in parallel, if you think, for instance, about multi-user online games, or second life in the past.

[00:43:31.970] - Dietmar Koering

I think it is really interesting to have on the one hand this amazing market with NFTs where an artist can prove the authenticity of an original work, whereas certain platforms are not that successful at the moment. We have the avatars, the NFTs, but then maybe some platforms aren't as successful as they could be.

[00:43:58.380] - Darja Popolitova

I think there is a very interesting institutional gap with the NFT market. I also wanted to sell a video as an NFT to a museum, but museums don't have the capabilities [to purchase] because they need some special wallets, coins, and stuff. In the end, I just sold the file.

[00:44:21.850] - Sebastian Mühl

To add on to this, I think these are very different topics, the NFT market, particularly in the arts, and the use of virtual reality platforms by artists. But the NFT problem is very ambiguous, when you look at how NFTs and blockchain technology are used in the art world. On the one hand, you can see artists who use NFTs in order to get their works sold on a market that is not the official gallery market. NFT technology has a very empowering dimension for many artists, young artists, who are not represented by galleries, and who are not exhibiting in big museums, to actually make a living out of their work. I see this as a positive or empowering aspect. But on the other hand, and from a point of view of the commodification of the artwork, it's just another twist to find ways to commodify works that are, at first sight, not easy to commodify. I don't think that NFTs have to do so much with the question of authorship, because in the end, digital works are still reproducible, they can still be copied, or viewed on

various different platforms. You just have this particular file which is authenticated.

[00:46:32.090] - Stefan Sorgner

They [NFTs] cannot be reproduced as that specific work of art. [...] There's a verification code that is within the blockchain and it associates you, or the artist, with that specific work. And [it confirms to] the buyer that it belongs to the buyer. That means it's a unique piece, like any print which has a specific number, like one out of 200. That's the uniqueness, the phenomenological quality. Of course, you can take a screenshot and multiply it indefinitely, but that's not what it's all about. It's about the uniqueness, its being verified in the blockchain and that you want to have an authentic piece. You don't want to have a false Gucci bag, you want to have the real Gucci bag. That does make a difference. There is a market for it, there are crypto art galleries. I taught these NFTs in 2021. I know one of my students bought a couple of three crypto artworks afterwards. He is now working for a crypto art gallery and it seems to be that there's a lot of potential for younger artists in the digital art market now to be able to actually make some money out of it and have a basis for their living. I'm also curious about when you buy [digital] property, that property also needs to be built. I'm wondering if there is digital architecture, like building houses in the metaverse? Isn't that a potential? How big is that market?

[00:48:21.630] - Dietmar Koering

I mean, of course, certain offices already create architecture and cities in metaverses. In general, I think there is a market, yes, but I'm not sure how profitable that is at the moment. But we are only at the beginning of it. As an architect, I think it's amazing that you're actually not related to gravity [in the

metaverse], and to all those regulations. But of course, the question is that you have to certify in the digital world that the architecture was created by a specific architect. So [you confirm that] you bought the [actual] product. At the moment, the NFT gives you the only proof that what was created in the digital world comes from a real person. Are there any other concepts to create identity in the digital world?

[00:49:30.350] - Stefan Sorgner

A verified profile... the blockchain... But [the blockchain] has lots of other issues, too, in particular when it comes to global warming. It's enormously problematic, I must say. I'm not sure whether this issue can be solved. When it comes to identification, it works really well. For example, I know people who graduated from MIT and also received their certificate as an NFT. When you apply for a job, then you always have to submit your exam results or your certificates. It's verified in the blockchain and the ones reading your application have a clear proof that you're not someone who's falsifying the documents, as it happens very often. So that application could be extremely useful.

[00:50:27.070] - Dietmar Koering

I absolutely agree. What could we say now, at the end? I think it was quite difficult to have under one roof terms like cyborgs, avatars, and AI, and then, on the other hand, philosophical thinkers, art historians, architects, and jewellery artists. It was a very interdisciplinary set here. I think we were discussing very hot topics and we have to see where all this goes. We started with posthumanism, but even with this term, as you mentioned, Stefan, in one of your books, there is not only posthumanism, but also transhumanism and metahumanism. So to wrap it up, I would like to ask a question to each of you, and

please try to answer very shortly. The question is what the trajectory of a posthuman future might look like? How might technologies evolve over time and how could they shape future life on earth and beyond?

[00:51:46.320] - Marc Ries

From my point of view, there is no posthumanism. And there will be no posthumanism. There will be some kinds of humanism, but forget about the post. Why? My vision is that digital transformation is to help us to get in touch [with each other] and to create new possibilities to solve our main problems – but not to build a new smart bomb or new military technologies. It is to intervene in our main problems. You know what problems are at stake. I do have the vision that digital technologies, and AI, can really support us in this shitty situation we are in. But it's only to support us and not to promise a new meta- or posthuman future.

[00:52:53.490] - Dietmar Koering

Thank you, Marc. You, Stefan.

[00:52:56.520] - Stefan Sorgner

Firstly, it really makes a difference whether it's metahumanism, posthumanism, or transhumanism. There are so many different traces and there's a massive discussion, so really look into this and its different political and cultural pedigrees. But when the question concerning the expected future comes up, I get it asked on a regular basis. I'm not a futurologist, I cannot predict the future. That's not a proper academic enterprise, however. But when there are visions or ideas which are rooted in contemporary developments, then I would say one of the really fascinating elements is the separation of

sexuality from reproduction. What used to be in the natural law theory, and the Catholic religion, was that you should have sex only if there is a possibility to reproduce [yourself]. That gets more and more disentangled. We started off with the condom, the pill, then in vitro fertilisation, surrogate motherhood. Now, we've got artificial wombs which are already being realised with lambs being brought to terms in bio bags. Half a year ago, the news came about stem cells and that they have created synthetic embryos. Craig Venter has used the 3D printer as a bio printer, in order to create life on the computer, and then print life. In the UK, we already have children with three biological parents. There are so many different possibilities of creating life. We humans, yes, we play gods. Now, we have the technologies which enable us to create life. This is what God used to do, and now we're able to do so. We can use sex for fun, and technologies for professionalising reproduction.

[00:54:51.390] - Dietmar Koering

Okay, interesting perspective. Darja.

[00:54:57.290] - Darja Popolitova

I was thinking throughout the conversation how technology changes our body, our gestures, our postures, for instance the way we hold the smartphone as we tap, zoom and scroll it. I was thinking, with regard to the jewellery, that if our body would be different, the jewellery would also look different. If you would look like octopuses, then probably the jewellery would be different. I think that [...] we will be applied to technology in the same way that technology will be applied to us. We will evolve simultaneously.

[00:55:49.360] - Dietmar Koering

There we are again, with the octopus as an image for AI and distributed consciousness. Sebastian.

[00:56:00.810] - Sebastian Mühl

The question is, what's the idea of a posthuman life? I don't know, because I also struggle with the idea of what posthuman life should be. But if we think about what posthuman life should be. But if we think about digital technologies and digitalisation – with my perspective coming from the arts and visual culture – I think that we witness technological transformations and new media through which art and images are nowadays produced and circulating. But that doesn't mean that physical, or non-digital forms of art-making would disappear, or that the analogue image would disappear. We have these different trends, the digital image and the analogue image, digital art and more physical forms of art, going in parallel, and oftentimes intersecting. What I definitely embrace are new forms of art-making that explore digital worlds or that are built on digital platforms. But I also experienced in the past couple of years that there is a major trend back to [analogue] physicality and non-digital forms of embodiment in the arts. Take, for instance, post-internet art that was a big thing during the past decade. It sounds at first sight that this is a form of art-making that is totally digitised and based on the internet, but in fact, these artists often insist on [analogue] materiality, even though a form of materiality that is infused by digital programming or 3D printing. But the works get back into the analogue space and become sculptural again. This is something that I really consider key: we are not getting rid of the analogue space, the analogue image, and the analogue artwork.

[00:58:50.290] - Dietmar Koering

Actually, it is also quite interesting to talk at the end about the avatar who wants to become human again.  
Eva.

Thank you.

[00:59:00.020] - Eva Sommeregger

Coming back to what Sebastian just said, I think post-internet art is an example of the fact that we have entered an era where the digital cannot be seen without the physical any longer, and vice versa. They are inseparably related to each other. But I would like to actually argue for a posthuman existence because it radically challenges the unity of the subject. I would underline that we need to do more research about posthuman thought, and in this regard, what roles can be taken by avatars as they blend the binary between the body and its environment. Relating to what you just said, Dietmar, avatars can be independent entities, maybe even living their own lives, maybe they can also open up for a vision of a multiple identity. Again, identity is not something that's bound to something singular, but it can represent multiplicity. In the end, following Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism*, this is a feminist motif – since multiplicity represents freedom.

[01:00:49.320] - Dietmar Koering

Wonderful. Thank you. I really want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Darja, Stefan and Marc for being part of this really interesting discussion. My thanks also extend to my comrades Eva Sommeregger and Sebastian Muehl. The same appreciation goes, of course, to our listeners out there, and we eagerly await your feedback and suggestions which you can email to us via [lmda@lma.lv](mailto:lmda@lma.lv). Finally, thank you for tuning in and let's see what the future might bring us. Let's be positive about it. Thank you.

[01:01:37.160] - All