SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

**How is the use of technology in art a reflection of contemporary society?**

*(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)*

All works of art inevitably reflect the society or context in which they are produced. Conversely, changes in society, such as the role of technology, provide opportunities for artists to respond and challenge using unconventional means.

Artist Patricia Piccinini claims that she is ‘merely responding to my world … It's something to reflect upon’. Encompassing a wide range of media, from her hyper-realistic sculptures to video installations, Piccinini uses mainly high-end technology to examine medical developments in society and the ethical implications that can emerge from them. This is not to say that she is anti-technology, rather she critiques the commercialisation of industries that drive and subvert ethical standards. Her view of technology is therefore impartial: she is interested simultaneously by the ‘unknown’ ambiguities that can result from technology as well as by the artificialities of companies.

*First artist — quote suggests intention — relationship to society*

Piccinini has claimed that she is most interested in the concept of ‘customisation’ in her works. Her *Car Nugget* series was a celebration of individuality allowed through technological means, in the literal sense. The series, verging on the ‘sleek’, representing a duality of artificiality and organicness, were ‘consumer fetishes’, reflecting our society's drive towards ‘must have’ consumable goods. Their shiny, metallic glossings epitomised the ‘essence of car’.

*First example — analysed to support argument*

Piccinini wants her audience to confront the role of technology in society. She achieves this through the medium that best suits her original ideas. In *Protein Lattice* she reflected a science laboratory experiment that had occurred with the transplantation of a human ear onto a mouse. Again in this composite photograph Piccinini was aware of the formal exigencies and composition techniques that advertising agencies use to ‘lure’ their audience. However, the viewer is simultaneously repelled by Piccinini's hypothetical hybrids, which is not always her aim. In works such as *The Young Family* 1999 she deliberately superimposed human features onto her hybrids, the hypothetical result of producing ‘Frankenstein’-like creatures for organs. As the viewer can relate to the human features, such as hands and feet, they are inclined to empathise with its ‘fatalism’ and to take responsibility for human endeavours and interventions in science.

*Artist's choices — second example to explain intentions and meaning*

*Third example to explore technology in the contemporary world*

Piccinini works collaboratively, reflecting the norms of digital art in society, where art often involves the collapse of boundaries between the disciplines of art, science and technology, challenging the role of the sole ‘skilled’ artist.

*Conceptual Framework statement*

Carnal artist Orlan uses her performance and surgical ‘interventions’, challenging Duchamp's idea and instead insisting that the body is no longer the ideal readymade … ‘It is a blank canvas to be explored and manipulated.’ In one of her earliest performance works in 1977, Orlan sought to expose the gender hypocrisy of both the artworld and society. In *The Kiss of the Artist* she wore a reproduced torso that allowed passers-by to insert a coin into the slot in her ‘cleavage’. By doing so, Orlan would allow the chanced-upon person to receive a kiss. By publicly enacting the concept, Orlan exposed the constraints of her society by comparing the art object to a profitable commodity, and therefore women to a commodity —‘the merchandising of the artist's personality replaced the merchandising of art’.

*Second artist introduced in relation to question*

*First artwork example explained*

Orlan has consistently reflected, explored and challenged the role of technology in society, insisting that ‘I am not looking for an improvement or rejuvenation, but a complete change of image’. She seeks to transform herself both inside and out, using technological developments such as plastic surgery. In her *Transformation of Saint Orlan* series, from 1990 onwards, she explored and challenged the virgin–whore dichotomy of traditional art. Her body literally became a site for public exploration as she underwent nine surgical procedures, borrowing features of figures considered the pinnacle of beauty in Western art and transposing them onto her own face, for example the chin of Botticelli's Venus. This sub-plantation expressed Orlan's view that in a few years physical identity will be as easily changed as hair colour.

*Artist's use of technology to comment on society*

*Second example*

Her works further challenge the role of technology through confrontational means (just as Damien Hirst's installations rely on ‘shock as a composite factor’). In her procedures, the viewer is simultaneously overwhelmed and repelled by her performances, which play on the audience's expectations and senses. She juxtaposes the carnal, bloody extreme of her surgery, documented in video and artefact form afterwards, with absurdist costumes and sexually liberative overtones such as strip dancers.

*Conceptual Framework*

*Changes in ‘artwork’ linked to changes in society*

Orlan not only reflects her society but challenges it, her body acting as a non-permanent, transitory performance space, leaving it physically vulnerable, raising questions such as what is left of her identity after such extensive technological intervention.

*Summary*

Stelarc similarly uses medical and digital interfaces to communicate and reflect upon the role of technology in society. He takes a similar approach to Orlan, claiming that the human body has become obsolete (just as Orlan claims that we no longer have to rely on the body that God and genetics gave us). He insists that a man–machine symbiosis is already occurring in society, and thus the notions of cyborgs and cybernetics frequently appear in his works. Although he uses his own body, this does not form one of the main concerns of his art practice — rather it is a ‘non-objective’ tool, a ‘structural element amongst other architectural elements’. This depersonalisation formed a large component of his early *Suspension works* (1978). In his later works, which are visually immersive and quasi-fantastical, he used medical imaging and technology to communicate his ideas about physical ‘improvement’. In *Ekoskeleton* (1999) he extended the utility of his limbs using kinetic digital transmission signals, and in *Third Arm* he used a similar means, this time raising audience interaction with the ‘art object’ to a new level by allowing remote audiences to coordinate and manipulate his movements. Similarly to Piccinini and Orlan, his work challenges the traditional role of the artist as ‘sole creator’, reflecting the progress of the artworld from the influence of movements such as Dada and Fluxus. His work transgresses the boundaries of art, as his experiments to ‘dissolve limitations’ dissolve the boundaries between art, technologies and science.

*Third artist — restating of question in light of artist's practice*

*First artwork example*

*Second example*

Contemporary artists use the context of their society not only to reflect upon their environment, but to challenge and subvert traditional boundaries and to provoke a reaction from their audience. In this way the audience, too, is forced to reconsider the role of technological developments in their society.

*Conclusion — argument linked back to question*

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