In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard argues that simulation no longer has a referent in the physical world but has become ‘… the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.’¹ He goes on to suggest that in our era:

‘The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an infinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational.’²

John Rainey is interested in how the prevalence of the virtual and the simulated in our daily lives can cause our experiences of ‘reality’ and systems of living to become increasingly hyperreal. He notes that:

‘The synthetic experience intrinsic to current communication technologies and social media, incites elaborate social behaviour and new acts of subjective representation in an environment mediated by images and information.’ Indeed, one of the frequently cited causes for people’s development of a more mutable notion of identity is the advent of social networking media, from online gaming to Twitter and Facebook, all of which provide a range of reasons to enter into virtual worlds and, in the process, to generate a flow of highly subjective information in the creation of a hyperreal self.

Rainey’s investigation takes in how our synthetic identity or ‘uploaded consciousness’ is represented and transmitted by such media. Starting with a photographic image, he distorts and rescales it, using software to produce a hybrid representation, caught between the digital and the physical. In the following stages plaster prototypes are produced by means of high definition 3D printers and rapid prototyping machines, before being finally translated into porcelain. Limbs or upper jaws emerge from turned forms, reminiscent of the bases of classical busts. Conventions of display merge with human form, analogous to the morphing of real people and their online desired representations. He seeks an ‘aesthetic of synthetics’, using vibrant colour to emphasize the disjuncture between nature and cultural construct.

He refers to his figures as ‘Sculptural hyperbodies and prosthetic others’, identifying them as “other” to traditional ideas of bodily representation and humanity, ‘as they have digital activity and artificiality engrained in their existence’. Such hyperreal bodies pick up on our increasing inability to differentiate between reality and its simulations. His use of the term ‘prosthetic’ is metaphorical, used to designate a re-conception of human experience in the light of advanced technologies, such as those put forward in posthuman or cyborg theory.

In her 1985 essay, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, science historian Donna Haraway describes cyborgs as oppositional and without innocence, pointing to how: ‘Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other.’³ Here and in the work of other...
theorists we are asked to consider the implications on human consciousness of a wide variety of contemporary possibilities and circumstances, from those arising from body part replacement surgery to the ability of modern media to instil curiously vivid memories of events that we did not directly experience.

Rainey’s works present us with enigmatic narratives from the unthinkable yet possible future, where we are left to piece things together on the basis of just partial knowledge. The Theatre of Projected Self, a uterine-like installation, appears to cultivate new life (or perhaps spare parts?) within a seed-bed tray. Meanwhile a fully-fledged figure waits nearby, witnessing her virtual screen-bound self - an image in which we, the onlooker also appears in real time. Within this image, as with Haraway’s description of the cyborg, we are forced to recognise ourselves as ‘creature[s] of social reality as well as of fiction’.  

John Rainey’s new works carry ideas of multiplicity, observation and self-editing, all familiar from our engagement with virtual worlds. Arrested from another social space, his extraordinary sculptures exist as snapshots of our activities and practices within the virtual realm and speak of an altered form of human consciousness.

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John Rainey (born 1985) studied at Manchester Metropolitan University (2006-2009) and at the Royal College of Art (2010-2012). His work has been exhibited in the 2009 British Ceramics Biennial, Stoke-on-Trent; The Salone Internazionale del Mobile, Milan, 2012; and the Santorini Biennale of Arts 2012. Newly commissioned work will feature as part of the 2013 Derry-Londonderry UK City of Culture programme, funded by The Culture Company 2013


ibid., p 2.


ibid., p 164.