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Anthropological estrangement and the making-of  
Persona at the Musée du Quai Branly**

Emmanuel Grimaud

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# Frontiers of the (Non)Humanly (Un)Imaginable: Anthropological Estrangement and the Making of *Persona* at the Musée du Quai Branly

Emmanuel Grimaud

## Introduction

The *Persona* project was the third anthropological exhibition organised by the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (MQB hereinafter), following *What is a body?* (2006) and *The Making of Images* (2010).<sup>1/2</sup> The MQB has a large collection of what is referred to in France as “*arts premiers*”, a term used to avoid the notion ‘primitive’. Crucially divided into regions, these collections derive mostly from outside of Europe. Most of the exhibitions taking place in MQB focus on a particular region or single out a specific type of art. *Persona* (first called *Strangely Human*) had a different purpose, looking at the moving frontiers of personhood, exploring the past and future of the relationships between the human and the non-human, and trying to visualise unexplored possibilities for future alliances.

*Persona* had a comparative purpose, putting together artefacts belonging to the MQB collections, albeit in deliberate disregard of the geographic origins of objects, including also robotics and contemporary robotic art, as well as a wide range of other artefacts belonging to the history of technology – ghost hunting devices from the nineteenth century, for instance. Going beyond cultural comparison, building up clashes and confrontations

of worlds and devices, the exhibition also had a political dimension and, we hoped, a relevance in our troubled times, as it was to ponder on a wider scale the implications of the *non-human turn* in anthropology.<sup>3</sup> Dealing with what is human and what is not human through a wide range of alien encounters, travelling between the animate and the inanimate, the organic and the inorganic, the infra-human and the more than human as well, *Persona* engaged the visitor in an experience of estrangement, an extended “uncanny valley”.<sup>4</sup>

### **Beyond the “uncanny valley”**

Before developing more precisely what is meant by the “uncanny valley”, as coined by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, I will briefly explain how we encountered what I consider one of the most intriguing theories ever proposed in the field of human/non-human interaction. After doing fieldwork on religious automata in India and how idols on ritual platforms had been made into interactive animatronics, I was invited to work in Japan with the artist Zaven Paré in the laboratory of roboticist Hiroshi Ishiguro in Osaka. Paré and I wrote a book on Japanese robotics called *The Day Robots Will Eat Apples* (2011), based on a series of experiments around the *Geminoid*, a tele-operated robot designed by Hiroshi Ishiguro as a copy of himself.<sup>5</sup> Making a simulacrum of a human being is a strange idea, but Ishiguro was working hard to give the appearance of a human to his robot. At heart, Ishiguro’s research questioned what it means to be human, to have a human appearance, and especially what constitutes human presence. He studied in particular how “eye movements” between two interacting humans would synchronise with each other or follow predictable loops. Thanks to Ishiguro, Paré and I could develop our own set of anthropological experiments. I call these experiments “anthropological”, because we not only wanted to investigate questions such as the limits of animism – a classical topic in anthropology – but we also had to use protocols and tricks inspired by theatre, puppetry, and science fiction, which were altogether different from the usual robotic experiments, in order to reveal hidden possibilities or affordances of the *Geminoid* that nobody had yet considered. This robot was the best way to investigate what the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori called the “uncanny valley”.

Mori’s paper on the uncanny explored an intriguing idea illustrated by a simple graph (Mori 1970). He realised that the more you give a human form to an object and especially a robot, the more you create empathy. Yet at a certain point, when the object appears too similar to human appearance, a reversal of empathy takes place, giving rise instead to disgust or fear – in short, an

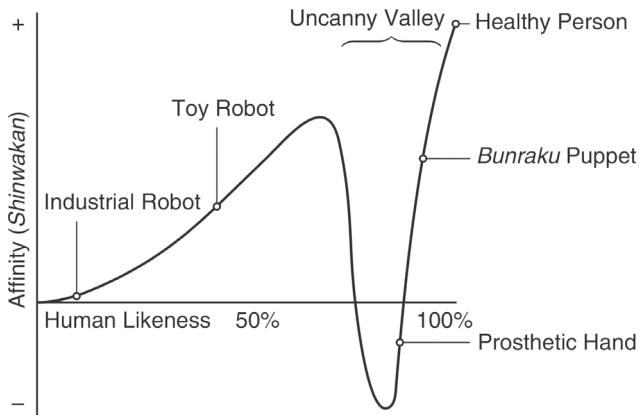


Fig. 1.2 Uncanny Valley Graph. Cited in: Mori (2012 [1970]: 99)

“uncanny” feeling difficult to overcome. To illustrate this “uncanny valley”, Mori used the example of a hand prosthesis. Shaking hands with someone with a hand prosthesis without knowing that it is indeed not a ‘real’ hand might create surprise or fear, because the prosthetic hand is cold and not like a human hand. Inspired by Jentsch’s theory developed in *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen* (1906), widely discussed by Freud, the “uncanny valley” became a hot topic in humanoid robotics for many years. In this Japanese version of the *unheimlich*, there was a way to go beyond the uncanny. According to Mori, *bunraku* puppet theatre and religious Buddhist art were examples of successful means that had managed to go beyond the ‘uncanny’ without any complex programming or artificial intelligence. Mori was here addressing a troubled zone for roboticists, inviting them to reflect upon a central question: Do we need to make robots that look like us? Since, if we do, we will always face the risk of falling into the ‘uncanny’ valley. At the time, Mori already invited roboticists to look at other forms of artificial creatures in a wider perspective. Because the question of knowing whether we want to live with robots marked by human or other appearance is not only a question of design, aesthetics, or ‘empathy’; it is a cultural, social, and political issue. Mori’s paper was published in French in the MQB-associated journal *Gradhiva* along with a conversation Zaven Paré, Chihiro Minato, and I conducted with him at his home in Tokyo (2012). In the introduction to the issue written with Denis Vidal, we proposed taking the “uncanny valley” further and investigating, with the tools of anthropology, the troubled zones of artificial creature design. Following

publication, the museum invited us to propose an exhibition to explore the potentialities of confronting its collections with robotics.

The uncanny valley presented to us a living enigma, a problem still considered an unresolved conundrum worthy of attention by roboticists today. As Mori himself told us: “I just pointed out a problem, but I have no solution.” Working in Ishiguro’s lab, we realised that he, for instance, had a rather literal interpretation of it. He wanted to go beyond the moment of what we decided to call “ontological confusion”, in which one is faced with the uncertainty over whether one is confronted with a machine or a human being. He was convinced that the only way to have an interesting relationship with his robot was to increase his ‘humanity’. Here, doubt or uncertainty regarding the ontological status of the robotic entity he was dealing with acted as a kind of provocation in the interaction with a humanoid. Nonetheless, there remained always a moment in which the machine took over and the mechanical behaviours and loops of the humanoid were rendered visible. During several bizarre moments, some of the most ‘empathetic’ among us were tempted to treat the robot perhaps more like a human being with special needs, caring for it, while the more cynical among us quit the experiment and rejected it as useless mimicry.<sup>6</sup> This posed the question for us, whether we might better assume machines to be machines, rather than trying to fool ourselves with machines in ‘human disguise’? This problem opens up an old debate waged since Alan Turing’s famous *Imitation Game* (1950).<sup>7</sup> The idea that machines should make themselves more acceptable by looking like animals or humans, then, posed itself as a bizarre ‘civilisational’ choice that we wanted, carefully, to question.

## Anthropological estrangement

Deeply anchored in this mutant world and full of open questions, *Persona* was riskier than most of the exhibitions that had taken place in the MQB museum, seeking to move beyond stereotypes and crass juxtapositions, yet integrating both more ‘classic’ artefacts from the collection and cutting-edge robotic research. I am still surprised that it was accepted with such enthusiasm by the museum, and I am deeply grateful they took the risk. When the project was almost ready on paper, H el ene Fulgence, the person in charge of exhibitions, welcomed me. Curating this show was a privilege to me, since very few anthropologists had curated exhibitions in the museum. “Anthropologists don’t always make good curators”, she said, “but people are very fond of anthropological exhibitions, they want more *knowledge*.” She went on to clarify a few points:

The idea behind what we call ‘anthropological exhibitions’ is more question-oriented than artefact-oriented. The aim is to propose global conceptual frameworks, wider perspectives, and not only beautiful objects. We are still trying to find the right formula between the informative and the spectacular.

Early on in our conversation, I realised the kind of challenge *Persona* would pose. From what I understood, it had to be question- or content-oriented but not confusing, informative but not too much to read, pedagogical but not academic, and last but not least, it had to be spectacular but informative. “Anthropological exhibitions give people a conceptual framework much more than exhibitions that are simply artefact-oriented or whose purpose is to introduce an unknown kind of ‘curiosities’ to the public”, she added, “but an exhibition requires a strong storyline. It’s storytelling with artefacts after all.”

There is great uncertainty about what anthropology is today, given that after the non-human turn of the early twenty-first century, its subjects cover almost anything (non)humanly (un)imaginable. Therefore, it is equally unclear what makes a good ‘anthropological exhibition’, since it could also be about *estranging* almost everything. There is no single formula for estrangement. But the MQB was ready to experiment, searching for another equilibrium of content, story, and sensory experience. If nothing at our early stage of conceptualisation was really stabilised, our project was at least carefully evaluated in its potential to offer a new kind of fusion between “content” (also referred to as “knowledge” or “information”) and “display” (denoting “artefacts” or “objects”) inside a “scenario” (or “story”). The previous MQB exhibitions I mentioned had made radically opposite choices of navigation into cultural heterogeneity: the exhibition *What is a body?* (2006) by curators Stephane Breton, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Anne-Christine Taylor presented a chaotic encounter with different cultural worlds, while the careful structuralist grammar of *The Making of Images* curated by Philippe Descola, facilitated a shift from one art to another.<sup>8</sup> With *Persona*, we had no choice but to proceed differently, going deeper into the dark matter of the “uncanny valley”, an unfathomable zone with no possibility to escape.

## Envisioning the frontiers of personhood

If Mori’s theory of the uncanny valley became our magnifying glass to address the issues of personhood, I will now outline how it inspired us to use



a scenographic method guiding almost every choice of artefact in *Persona*. In fact, each gallery or display could be seen as a small “uncanny valley” made of various artefacts belonging to eclectic sources in a kind of kaleidoscopic structure. The valley theory invited us to juxtapose, aggregate, and compare objects from diverse sources according to two parameters of Mori’s theory, resemblance and familiarity. With our scenographer Constance Guisset, we made these into a principle that became almost a distinctive feature of *Persona*: each series of objects, module, or unit should convey not only a set of possibilities but also a clash, provoking a kind of turmoil in the visitors’ minds. This helped us to avoid several risks in terms of scenography.

To summarise its movement, *Persona* was a speculative scenography, leading from one enigma to another, starting with a clash of experiments and finishing with a clash of choices. The main problem that anthropological exhibitions have to face is how to display meaningful heterogeneities, build comparative frameworks, and propose transcultural tools of analysis. Common traps of anthropological exhibitions are well-identified and not very different from those haunting anthropological thought more generally: the great divide in ‘cultural areas’, the colonial and postcolonial models, including those of the West and the non-West, and evolutionary scaling from the primitive to the modern. These models are still very operational in ethnographic museums today. Attempts to build up alternative modes of organising artefacts are made but often fall into other traps, such as aesthetic formalism, new age mysticism, or para-cultural chaos.<sup>9</sup> If we could have in *Persona* a Hindu god next to a Japanese robot, or a Cameroonian divination mice box next to a Belgian ghost hunter’s kit from the nineteenth century, it was not because we disregarded any criteria of comparison, or because we adhered to any specific formal aesthetic criteria, such as surrealism’s primitivism, or because there was something called ‘robotics’ or something called ‘divination’ that would enable us to put these objects together. It was rather because the people who made these kinds of interfaces tried to solve similar problems and found out very different solutions and responses. In articulating these objects in the same space, we told another story, creating a clash of possibilities in a gallery of virtually infinite choices. Such a clash then underlines the singularity of the speculative solutions invented in history and articulated in the form of objects and devices and helps us to grasp them as ‘choices’ among others.

The MQB was probably the best playground; it was such an uncanny valley in itself that it was difficult to choose the right objects to display since we could have chosen them all. Additionally, the extensive ethnographic literature on ‘personhood’ helped us in choosing the most suitable artefacts.

Lévy-Bruhl's seminal text *The "Soul" of the Primitive* (1927), for instance, provides plenty of examples that disturb our preconceived notion of personhood, insofar as it considers how objects, stones, mountains, and plants can be seen as 'persons' in various cultures, yet also how 'personhood' cannot be restricted to 'humans' alone. Personhood, instead, is attached to elements of the surroundings, living or non-living, with whom humans form multi-persons, bi-persons, and so on. Considering some of the artefacts and collections at the MQB from this point of view, we realised to what extent Eduardo Viveiros De Castro was right to say that "the concept of person is anterior and logically superior to the concept of the human" (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 58). Among the entities represented in artefacts, there are actually fewer human and more non-human ones. This process helped us to identify that 'personhood', and not humanity, was the main problem behind the uncanny valley. The problem that we then faced became how we could shift from Mori's humanoid robot to a mask from an entirely different region of the world, or from a Tlinglit figure representing a sea spirit to a Gond tree inhabited by a ghost. It was not possible without changing completely the parameters of Mori's graph. The collections of the MQB became the main resource to go beyond the uncanny valley, but they did not remain the only one.

### **Deep into a troubled zone**

*Persona* was not only engaged with artefacts from the MQB collections, but also with curiosities from science and technology museums (Henry Lavery's psychograph, Angelo Mosso's 'human circulation balance', for instance), treating them as experimental devices digging into uncanny valleys that nobody had thought of. The brain itself became a troubled area with the psychograph. What the soul consists of remains an unknown zone, too, but becomes yet more palpable with Mosso's balance. We also included in our research, and eventually in the exhibition, contemporary art, especially robotic art that would confront us with variations of the uncanny valley problem. The common feature between the works of art we chose was not only their reflexive edge, their ability to question our relationship to machines. They were pointing out something invisible, pointing out the strangeness of it. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (2005) and *The Questionable Gods of Biomechanics* (2007) by the Dutch artist Christian Zwanikken are exemplary pieces of the kind of effect we were looking for.

They inspired us at the very beginning of the project, because they presented us with hybrid-systems that mix mechanics with living and non-living

elements, thus prompting one to spend hours wondering: “Who is there?” One can be scared, fascinated, or amused, but Zwanikken’s artworks invite one to enter a special kind of uncanny valley – and yet his animal creatures present a choice completely different to the *Geminoid* created by Ishiguro. To put them in the same room created a ‘clash of possibilities’ representing choices radically different to the same problem. In the same space, a ‘polytheist’ machine would allow the visitor to choose his own Hindu god through a manual device designed by us in collaboration with an automata maker from Mumbai. The visitor had the choice to create their own avatar from nine models of upper parts (e.g. the head of a monkey, peacock, or human, etc.), a type of body (multiple arms, etc.), various types of animal lower parts (squid, snake, etc.). There was also a mechanical Buddha with multiple arms, a very hypnotic piece made by the Korean artist Wan Zi Won, which illustrated the possibility for roboticists to go beyond the uncanny valley by incorporating a spiritual dimension into their machines. These were only some of the different options proposed by artists, and put in our exhibition, which responded to Mori’s uncanny valley problem.

By chance, whereas robotics produces artefacts that are difficult to categorise, variously designed with a human or an animal face, with animacy and agency, neither purely object nor person, robotic *art* plays with this ambiguity even more. Doubt, or uncertainty about “who is there”, as we asked in our exhibition, is part of the interaction in Christian Zwanikken’s zoo creatures, Zaven Paré’s tele-operated presences, and Yann Minh’s sexual interfaces that we included in our exhibition. These robot artistic displays presented us with a great variety of choices that helped us distance ourselves from the flow of commodities produced for a capitalist market, such as commercial robots, increasingly invasive ‘spybots’, robotic companions endowed with autonomy, or other technical artefacts. These blurred frontiers constitute the proto-robotics world we all inhabit; a world with an uncertain direction and no author. In short, there were many unsolved questions to which *Persona* responded, including questions about animal or robot rights, whether we should support the extension of ‘personhood’ to machines, or instead protest in the name of an old humanist contract. Still, after working with the MQB museum collections, we realised that these kinds of debates at the frontiers of the human and the non-human are less new than we think. In fact, many other types of contracts have been experimented with, and a wide variety of ‘pacts’ or alliances with *other than human* entities have been made in societies around the world. That could help us to rethink a Western, proto-robotic world – and maybe even offer alternatives to the choices we have to make.

*Persona* had a mission: to reset our modes of thinking the relationship between the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ in all its forms, whether indiscernible, more than human, anthropomorphic or not. Already at preliminary stages of the project, the uncanny effect guided us into critical zones we did not anticipate. In one exhibition space, we had to shift across vastly different historical epochs and through various scientific domains ranging from robotics to astrology, yet also from debates on animal intelligence to the cognition of plants, from biology to the history of spiritualism. And we had to do so step by step. Our research made it clear to us just how very uncertain the frontiers between human, object, animal, and machine have been throughout time, and it forced us to identify more clearly how at various epochs some of these realms had been divided, separated, fused with different kinds of social and political implications. The more we looked at the problem historically, the more we realised that the most *restrictive* notion of personhood was developed in Western societies of the post-Enlightenment era. This limitation was a pillar of an ecologically devastating conception as part of which humans regarded other, living and non-living entities as subordinated, deprived of a ‘mind’ or ‘interiority’. These ontological and political questions, which have become significant issues today due to ecological crises, different kinds of knowledge about the human and non-human world, as well as shifts of attitude, were the first matters of concern for *Persona*. The clash of possibilities that we outlined was thus not only a scenographic method, but also an attempt to challenge our consciousness of the choices which are offered by science and technologies, and on many of which we depend. It is not enough to point out, for instance, that biologists take plant cognition very seriously today, frequently discovering new forms of sensitivity that we had never thought of; or to direct our gaze towards ethologists who discover new abilities in the animal kingdom, such as mental images among cats or forms of culture in baboon societies. We need to go further in our understanding not only of the invisible alliances that make a living milieu possible, but also of the subconscious life of a wide range of entities, including the ones humans produce or cultivate without knowing. It is in this field of unexplored relationships that anthropology helps to clarify the field of possibilities ahead.

### **From animism to post-anthropomorphism: The structure of the exhibition**

This first part of the exhibition, entitled “Is there anybody out there?” set the tone. It showed how people beyond the narrow confines of psychology and

the experimental sciences had experimented with perception, hallucination, anthropomorphism, and the extrapolation of non-human presences. We had to start there because the uncanny valley does not make sense if it is not situated in the larger context of “limit experiments” in perception. The most well-known of these, such as the Turing test or the experiments of Heider and Simmel (explained below), are reductionist versions of experiences that have been taken further in artistic, religious, and popular forms.

Indeed, many objects, rituals, and beliefs are the results of experiments designed in forgotten contexts to play with perception, rarely revealing their experimental nature at first glance. The first part of the exhibit thus multiplied experiments in perception, starting with unexpected situations, such as walking in the forest or interpreting noises, encountering ‘presences’ initially hard to identify. The place accorded to *experiments* in the exhibition was key. All the experiments in experimental psychology that we showed, and even the lesser obvious forms of experiment, like shamanic experiences or encounters with ghosts, implied an *interaction* or an *encounter* with a ‘presence’. Mori’s idea of the uncanny valley itself is a form of alien encounter characterised by a maximal discomfort with a humanoid robot. We decided to play with the possibility of encountering such ‘presences’, using alien encounters and ghost experiences as a model. The visitor was invited to go through a series of small theatres (“dioramas”), displaying various situations in which one faced the limits or frontiers of one’s perception (in the world of microorganisms, looking at the cosmos, facing another animal, or sitting under a tree, etc). One example of the kind of resonances we tried to create was the “sensory deprivation experiment”, which opened the exhibition. It is a well-known way to study the mechanism of hallucination in the dark, or in isolation, but we tried to connect it to a popular classical motif in Christian art, namely that of St Anthony in the desert. The example concerns the hallucinatory presences around St Anthony, which provoke a question that has generated a lot of research in psychology since the end of the nineteenth century, namely: Are hallucinations in one’s head or ‘out there’ in the world?

We connected the well-known experiments conducted in 1944 by the psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel on causal attribution with abstract Melanesian ‘spirits’ and geometrical supernatural entities. The visitor was confronted with having to balance between Heider and Simmel’s animated sequence (a very short animated film in which two triangles and a circle moved inside and outside a square) and the possibility of making a ‘counter-experience’ with objects from the museum collections. Heider and Simmel’s audience was asked to interpret the behaviour of their geometric figures, asking, for instance, whether they were following, repelling, or

chasing one another. The experiment showed that one is easily tempted, without being compelled, to attribute behaviours to objects or to say, for instance, that the triangle is particularly ‘aggressive’, ‘excited’, or ‘insistent’; that it does everything to enter the square; or that one of the triangles follows the other at a time, while the small circle may appear ‘fragile’ or even ‘hesitant’.<sup>10</sup> Heider and Simmel’s experiment is a good example for a wider discussion of anthropomorphism in experimental psychology, which argues that attributing human features to things that are not apparently human-like is a widespread human cognitive tendency, a kind of ‘defence mechanism’, or reflex to make sense of the unknown. By contrast, the Melanesian abstract spirits were telling another story, opposite to the idea that *animism* is something happening in the mind, a brain module, or tendency to project living features onto things around us.<sup>11</sup> Animism, in this (psychological) sense, would imply a ‘non-living’ world; and thus not only a false but also misleading assumption.

Whereas the first part of our exhibition multiplied these kinds of speculative assemblages without giving a final answer, the second part – “Who is there?” – explored the techniques to detect and identify entities, to materialise them, or to guess what they are made of. In this part, we thus displayed divination tools, materials for ghost hunting and spirit research, machines to communicate with the dead, instruments drawn from aura research, and other curious tools from the margins of the history of science and technology. We offered a wide range of ‘resources’ to allow the visitors to immerse themselves into the field of perceptual experiments, for which we drew on a broad range of approaches: those from astrobiology that worked on imagining aliens; from biology that inquired into the behavioural agency of micro-organisms; or from paranormal activity, ghost hunting, and spirit research. All these activities debate the features and properties of non-human ‘entities’ and deal with shared questions also at the core of the uncanny valley, namely: How do we make sense of unknown bodies or entities, and how do we categorise and classify such unknown beings?

Only in the third part of the exhibition, “Beyond the uncanny valley” did visitors encounter Mori’s theory explicitly. In this section they passed through a garage of detached parts, prosthetics, and *ex votos*, before entering a gallery reproducing Mori’s uncanny valley in the form of various objects. There, the visitor would face objects that could be disturbing, or indeed create a kind of uncanny feeling regarding the issue of ‘personhood’. We confronted the visitors with entities – hybrids – that were not intuitively classifiable as either objects, persons, animals, humans, or something else, sometimes perhaps even defying classification altogether. Visitors thus had to decide on their

own which 'items' to choose in order to figure out their own uncanny valley experience, before proceeding toward the last part of the exhibition.

This fourth and last section, called "Extended personhood or what do we want to be surrounded with?" was constituted by a kind of show house made up of several rooms, including a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room, and a garage composed of quasi-humans. In this section, Japanese wind spirits were displayed next to a sex machine by Yann Minh, roots used in Vodun rituals to attach people, or a robot of the god Ganesha, to name but a few examples of the clashes we wanted to create. The show house proposed new possibilities, many of which were not addressed up until this point in the exhibition, questioning them with regard to their implications for practical living. The section thus asked, for example: What kind of non-humans are we ready to adopt?

### Post-anthropomorphism

*Persona* was definitely using the provocative and not unproblematic means of juxtaposition and what I called 'clash of possibilities' and perhaps unexpected (by standard scientific classifications) objects as a method, but it also tried to provoke a clash in the mind of the visitor. In fact, our familiarity with *both*, science fiction and canonised anthropological literature, might have given *Persona* another distinctive feature. We were inspired in particular by the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, notably by *The Android and the Human* (1972). In this speculative work, Dick showed remarkable intuition about human/non-human relations, pointing out that the more our environment equipped itself with machines and artificial animacy, the more it would be poised to abound with a multifarious muddle of entities liable to arouse doubt as to their nature. In his view, the challenge was to figure out how to avoid reducing this complex problem to the psychological question of the "the ascription of intentionality". Beginning with the idea that the "primitive mind" has a tendency "to animate its environment", he stresses the very specific role played by modern psychology, which, he writes, requested us for years to withdraw these anthropomorphic projections from what is actually inanimate reality, to *introject* – that is, to bring back into our own heads – the living quality which we, in ignorance, cast out onto the inert things surrounding us (Dick 1972, cited in: Sutin 1995: 183). Introjection, for Dick, therefore describes "the authentic mark of civilization" that distinguishes us from primitive beings that see their natural environment as "pulsing with a purpose, a life". The supposedly mature and scientific individual is therefore

condemned to eliminating these “childish projections” for the sake of the principle that “the world is dead, and that life resides solely within himself”. “But”, Dick continues, “one wonders: has he not also, in this process, reified—that is, made into a thing—other people? Stones and rocks and trees may now be inanimate for him, but what about his friends? Has he not now made them into stones, too?” (Dick 1972: 183) Dick does not only condemn the psychologising of the problem of attribution in the form of introjection and its implications. He also argues that “within the last decade, we have seen a trend not anticipated by our earnest psychologists – or by anyone else – which dwarfs that issue: our environment, and I mean our man-made world of machines [...] is in fact beginning more and more to possess what the earnest psychologists fear the primitive sees in his environment: animation” (Dick 1972, cited in Sutin 1995: 183).

It is worth noting that at the time Dick wrote those lines, a number of currents in psychiatry explored the idea that introjection and analogising non-human diversity constitutes a psychological problem in itself. Harold Searles (1960), for example, noticed that among schizophrenic patients with an advanced level of the disorder, many began to see themselves as machines, or thought they were under the influence of uncontrollable mechanisms. They also saw themselves as animals or plants. But the anxiety was never as intense as when they had the feeling they were composed of circuits and bolts, or under the influence of a machine outside themselves that dispossessed them of their feelings or took over their vital functions. Searles proposed the term “relatedness”, to designate persons’ feelings of intimate kinship with surrounding non-human elements (atomic structures, molecules, metabolisms, patterns), which involve the maintenance of a “reasonable” relationship, cognisant of the fact that the search for fusion would appear to patients as the disappearance of one’s individuality. We know how much Dick enjoyed frightening his readers, using his novels to confront them with wayward forms of relatedness and a proliferation of fusions and personality confusions between humans and machines that would appear as “unreasonable” in the sense espoused by Searles. In doing so, Dick enables us to formulate a hypothesis about a central issue regarding non-human entities like machines: If an individual is conscious of their own introjections and convinced that “the world is dead, and that life resides solely in himself”, what kinds of unprecedented forms of relatedness in Searles’ sense are available to him?

We made a digression via Dick’s description of a technological animist modernity to stress the kind of short circuit we sought to create in the mind of visitors in our exhibition. Considering that anthropomorphism is



a widespread, useful, and flexible tool for human beings in their interaction with their environment, the question for us was not only to break with the patronising and discredited idea about animist thought in children and certain groups of people (see Lévy-Bruhl 1927); we also meant to show the ‘possibilities’ afforded by developing harmonious relationships with our environment, as well as by psychotic scenarios such as Searles’ study of schizophrenia. It is not uncommon to give names to objects. Even in our team, we address our computers or speak to our dogs and cats. In Japan, when people leave their house, it is common to salute it. The house is a living entity in itself to which you must show respect. Studies of religious contexts provide us with ample further examples in which objects, conceived as incarnations of invisible entities, come to materialise very subtle ‘states’ of being. Popular Hinduism is a good example. Most of the idols in India are not alive until they are charged by a priest through an ‘opening of the eyes’ ritual. And it is very commonplace to see stones or trees considered as ‘intermittent persons’, hosting goddesses or other spirits, potentially at any time. Gods have a wide range of possible ways to manifest, between the inorganic and the living. For Indian villagers, there is nothing uncanny about it. The uncanny lies somewhere else. When somebody comes with a tele-operated robot of Ganesha, thus enabling anyone to incarnate the deity and to have a conversation, a cruel game starts to evaluate the divinity of the impersonator (Grimaud 2016, see also figure 1.1).

### **Concluding discussion: MQB as a museum of forgotten possibilities**

*Persona* became a laboratory, not so much because it was intended to be one, or because the first part of the exhibition was inviting visitors to make experiments. Rather, it turned into one because people came and sat for hours in front of objects and devices, experiencing and experimenting with diverse kinds of ‘encounters’ with non-human entities. And yet, as the Indian physicist Jagadhish Chandra Bose wrote, “The true laboratory is the mind”. The uncanny valley hypothesis became our device for provoking visitor estrangement and engagement with the themes of the exhibition. From that point of view, *Persona* had not only an archaeological role to play, digging out past possibilities, but also an exploratory and *prospective* one, trying to figure out a possible alternative for our exploration of the non-human. In this respect, the MQB became for me a museum of forgotten possibilities.

What makes objects ‘anthropological’ for me, then, are the agentic possibilities they incarnate. Frequently, an object dealing with the non-human realm I explored in this chapter – be it a mask or a divination tool – will evoke a reaction. The experience of such a confrontation, in my understanding of the term, thus creates an anthropological experience regarding the idea of personhood. The collections of the MQB contain a great number of objects with the agency of displacing preconceived Western notions of personhood. Among them are objects treated as ‘persons’, where the term doesn’t refer to a human being, or even a ‘human-like’ entity. While the desire to reproduce a human being in humanoid robotics appears like a bizarre technological obsession, it can thus be regarded among a range of similar aspirations. The museum also contains objects *made* as persons, such as masks with human or animal features like eyes, mouths, and heads, which are kept deliberately in a state of abstraction or dissemblance to humans, so as to enhance their difference or supernatural characteristics. It was obvious for us that the collections of the museum offered a field from which to extend and revise the troubled zone that lay behind Mori’s idea of the “uncanny valley”.

We repopulated the ‘valley’ to such an extent that the theory itself transformed in dialogue with the museum collections and eventually gave rise to an unexpected new form of human/non-human interactions. It became an intriguing thought experiment for us to ask what would happen if we included not only other cases and ‘entities’ in the uncanny valley scenario but also other parameters in the graph. Beyond familiarity and likeness, there are many other ‘testable’ criteria of relevance to understand our relation to objects. Among them are, for example: the principles of responsiveness (the possibility to react or answer); the possibility to ‘control’ (to be able to influence or control the entity at a distance); animacy (e.g., being static but considered as a person – in the case of a Buddha statue, for example, stillness is interpreted as a state of active meditation); or the possibility to connect (activate or deactivate). Our research on these parameters did not stop with the end of the exhibition, and we subsequently formalised our graph of the *uncanny valley reloaded*, albeit too late to include it in the catalogue.

Through *Persona*, new puzzles emerged as people tried to make sense of the artefacts in our exhibition. We chose many of our objects (minerals, statues, robots), because they showed what might be considered *unexpected* forms of personhood, or because they played with preconceived Western notions of anthropomorphism. Many visitors to the show, however, appreciated the objects because they appeared to them as ‘uncanny’. This in itself was surprising for many of the people who had worked on this exhibition, because they had gotten used to manipulating these objects and to facing their ‘aura’. One

journalist even described *Persona* as “the terrifying exhibition of the MQB”, as if visitors had to prepare themselves to enter a kind of horror museum. While the uncanny valley began for us as an apparently minor problem of interaction adjustment for engineers in robotics, it became a more widespread issue once transplanted inside the MQB infrastructure, and turned into a broader question of cosmopolitics.

Another art critic made an interesting observation by stating that all media in the exhibition, irrespective of whether it concerned a painting, a sculpture, a photograph, or a mineral – were equally treated as “possible incarnations”. Previously it did not occur to us that what we had adhered to, implicitly, was a fairly simple principle – that if the possibility of animacy was imagined, it materialised in some way and thus existed. In the mind of a visitor, it does indeed not make a difference whether what conjures up this imagination is a photo of a semi-squid/semi-human creature, a robotic rendering, or a painting of it. While it might have been so for an historian of art concerned with the formal means and media of the presentation, what strikes the mind of the visitor – anthropologically speaking – is the possibility of experiencing a transfer, a transformation, and of imagining a world in which the existence of such a being would be possible. In that sense, the different types of media in our exhibition became equivalent, to us, to different ‘states of materialisation’ of this possibility. It thus became meaningful to juxtapose a robot of a giant squid, such as the one created by Takahashi Shiro, with the photographic work of Danny van Ryswyk depicting human-like beings with aquatic animal heads sitting in a Victorian living-room – that is, to make comparable the virtual imaginary world of Van Ryswyk’s photomontage with the mechano-pneumatic stage of Shiro’s robotic zoo. Certain possibilities of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ relations might be a dream for some, or a nightmare for others, but with *Persona* we tried to show that curatorial imagination can help envision fields of possibilities that would remain otherwise opaque or unimaginable.

## Notes

1. The image on page 76 is Figure 1.1 Ganesh Yourself Robot. Film by Emmanuel Grimaud, © Emmanuel Grimaud.
2. It was curated by a team of anthropologists, Anne-Christine Taylor, Denis Vidal, Thierry Dufrene, and myself.
3. We cannot quote here in extenso the literature that has been produced in the non-human turn, starting with the works of Latour, Descola, Viveiros de Castro

and now widespread in the Anglo-Saxon world. For an earlier account of the first generation of non-human ethnographies, see Houdart and Thiery (2011); and for a conceptual framework dealing with the frontiers of the human, see Vidal (2016). Grusin has recently tried to define the non-human turn of the end of twentieth century and early twenty-first beyond anthropology and the human sciences where it started. He sees it as a more general movement of reaction against social constructivism in the arts and humanities (2015).

4. On the notion of estrangement, see Shklovsky (1917). For tools to estrange our present and rethink the relationship between anthropology and science fiction, see Déléage and Grimaud (2019).
5. After the *Geminoid* experiment, Paré and I made a tele-operated robot of the Hindu god Ganesha to allow anyone to incarnate God and have a conversation. This experiment gave rise to a film called *Ganesh Yourself* (2016).
6. For a detailed account of these experiments, see Grimaud and Paré (2012).
7. Turing proposes to consider the question of the ‘intelligence’ of machines as less relevant than the question to know in which conditions a machine can fool us and make us believe that she has thinking abilities. See Turing (1950: 433-460).
8. See the catalogue (Descola 2010); and Descola’s contribution in Alloa (2015).
9. The Museum of Edinburgh, for instance, deliberately plays with weird arrangements (a Buddha next to a World War I airplane or a series of Chinese vessels). An overdose of these juxtapositions does not always provoke an increase in interest or attention. By contrast, the MQB follows a very strict classical plan divided by regions where the provenance is almost sacred.
10. Many people invent scenarios, saying that “Mrs. Triangle seeks to protect her little one from Mr. Triangle who ends up destroying the house (the rectangle)”, or that “Papa Triangle is in competition with Mama Triangle”, and so on. One of the main interesting aspects of the experiment is to point out a dynamic process of seeking intentions, causes, and motivations in order to make sense of what we perceive, especially when we are facing objects far removed from human appearance. Heider and Simmel distinguished between cases where the figures are taken in simultaneous movements with instantaneous contact and other cases where we are dealing with simultaneous movements with prolonged contact. In the same way, they differentiated the cases of successive movements with brief contact and the cases of successive movements with prolonged contact, all of which lead to distinct interpretations.
11. *Animism* at the HKW, curated by Anselm Franke, was dealing with these issues in 2012, using contemporary art as a way to investigate in a self-reflexive manner this anthropological question: What are the implications of the living/non-living divide and how variable it has been historically.

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