

“Becoming” through Performance

An analysis of the body in Stelarc’s performances

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This paper deals with the new condition of the body in the face of the cyber-technologies. Looking at the debate of disembodiment and embodiment, this study is a discussion on the dialectic of the body as subject and object by analysing the ambiguity of the body in Stelarc’s performances. The notion of “becoming” in Deleuze and Guattari that goes beyond this dialectic will be examined, and I will suggest the conceptualisation of the body as performance.

New Technologies and the debate of disembodiment/embodiment:

The technological age in which we are living, marks a turning point in the evolution of mankind. The human kind undergoes a mutational period, a process of transformation towards the “post-human”. The question is whether the post-human condition includes a future with or without the body. There are two radically opposing approaches that co-exist in the analysis of the relation of the body to the cyber-technologies.

Disembodiment → “body as object”:

The neo-Cartesian point of view of disembodiment envisages a future freed of the limits of the body where mind can travel freely. The cyber-theorist Michael Heim says that *“in cyberspace minds are connected to minds, existing in perfect concord without the limitations or necessities of the physical body.”*(1) Similarly, William Gibson, in his novel *Neuromancer*, envisages a cyberspace in which the body is taken as inferior to the mind and thus, is left behind.(2) These ideas, based on the Cartesian Dualism, suggest an objectification of the body, by splitting the mind from the body. In the Cartesian philosophy, the mind constitutes the essence of man, and the body is just a tool to master. According to Descartes we can grasp the reality only from the activities of the mind; we cannot count on the bodily experiences, for our senses mostly deceive us. This leads to the idea of “I have a body but not its reality”.

Embodiment → “body as subject”:

On the other hand, there is a second approach that formulates a post-evolutionist configuration through embodiment. Susie Ramsay, in her article “Bring your Body: The Dance Community and New Technologies” maintains that the only possibility of the union of man with the new technologies passes from embodiment.(3) Similarly, Susan Kozel affirms that *“it is through flesh and not in spite of it that we gain access to the virtual.”*(4)

These views maintain that the challenges of Virtual Reality and of dance intersect at the possibilities of developing the proprioceptive (of, relating to, or being stimuli arising within the organism) and vestibular (of, relating to, or functioning as a vestibule: the central cavity of the bony labyrinth of the ear or the parts of the membranous labyrinth that it contains) capacities. Both areas aim at

augmenting the capacities of the positioning of the body in space, and in its relation to others, as well as at developing its adaptation to velocity. Thus, phenomenologists, basing their premises on the idea of the “body-subject” suggested by Merleau-Ponty, argue that it is due to the body that we can interact with the new technologies.

Although situated at the opposite poles, both views have equally strong followers. The first suggests the statement of “I have a body” and thus, underlines the possibility of not having it; whereas the other puts forth the assertion of “I am a body” and maintains the impossibility of an existence without the body.

The ambiguous character of the Stelarcian body:

The performances of the Australian artist Stelarc are worth analysing in terms of the conception of the body, for they are situated at the very heart of the problematic issues generated around new technologies, and also for they present a body of a dubious character. At a first glance, he seems to be taking the “body as an object,” an object of design as he also admits himself; however, he also deals with the sensory aspect of the body which reminds us of the notion of the “body-subject.” He puts the body at the centre of all his concerns about the human existence, and this approach has some common points as well as some opposing ones with the idea of “being a body.”

Stelarc has been a sensational artist since the 70s for his exceptional performances in which he manifests the questions concerning the body in the face of new technologies. They are scandalous in political, ethical and physical terms. His suspension events, which altogether took place 27 times, were designed to test the physical and psychological limits of the body against gravity. These events differed in terms of the position of the body or the space in which they occurred. To name some of them: Sitting / Swaying event for rock suspension that took place at a gallery in Tokyo in 1980; City Suspension above the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen in 1985; Event for lateral suspension; Seaside suspension : Event for wind and waves...

Apart from his performances with low technology, Stelarc also uses excessive technology with cables, electrodes, and machines to create a cyborg. His performances are in the form of scientific experiments: He was invited to give a conference at NASA on his third arm project. He collaborates with scientists and medical doctors. His high-tech performances are grouped as “technology-attached,” “technology-inserted,” and “Net-Connected.”

His Net-Connected performances are Fractal Flesh, Ping Body and ParaSite:

In order to give an account on the performances we are going to discuss, I hereby include the descriptions as cited in his website:

*“At the November 1995 Telepolis '**Fractal Flesh**' event, Paris (the Pompidou Centre), Helsinki (The Media Lab) and Amsterdam (for the Doors of Perception Conference) were electronically linked through a performance website allowing the audience to remotely access, view and actuate Stelarc's*

body via a computer-interfaced muscle-stimulation system based at the main performance site in Luxembourg. Although the body's movements were involuntary, it could respond by activating its robotic Third Hand and also trigger the upload of images to a website so that the performance could be monitored live on the Net. Web server statistics indicated the live event was watched worldwide.

During the **Ping Body** performances, what is being considered is a body moving not to the promptings of another body in another place, but rather to Internet activity itself - the body's proprioception and musculature stimulated not by its internal nervous system but by the external ebb and flow of data.

The Ping Body performances produce a powerful inversion of the usual interface of the body to the Net. Instead of collective bodies determining the operation of the Internet, collective Internet activity moves the body. The Internet becomes not merely a mode of information transmission, but also a transducer, effecting physical action.

In the **ParaSite** performances, the cyborged body enters a symbiotic/parasitic relationship with information. Images gathered from the internet are mapped onto the body and, driven by a muscle stimulation system, the body becomes a reactive node in an extended virtual nervous system (VNS). This system electronically extends the body's optical and operational parameters beyond its cyborg augmentation of third arm, muscle stimulators and computerised audio visual elements.

A customised search engine gathers, analyses, and randomly scales incoming jpeg images. In real time the digital data are simultaneously displayed on the body and its immediate environment and, to the characteristics of the data, muscle movement is involuntarily actuated. The resulting motion is mirrored in a vml space at the performance site, and also uploaded to a website as potential (and recursive) source images for body actuation.

The body's physicality provides feedback loops of interactive neurons, nerves, muscles and third hand mechanism with digital video and software code reverberating through the internet. The body, consuming and consumed by the information stream, becomes enmeshed within an extended symbolic and cyborg system mapped and moved by its search prosthetics." (5)

Stelarcian body and the "body as object"

In these performances, Stelarc's understanding of the "body as object" differs from the Cartesian notion of the body in the sense that in Stelarc's performances the body is not conceived as inferior to the mind, on the contrary, the body occupies a primordial place; it determines the existence of Man. As Man is characterised by corporeal transformation and operational change, the corporeal existence in Stelarc's performances is determined by the actions that transform the body into what it operates. These new operations that the body executes allow the body to achieve new states of existence.

The Cartesian Dualism, while considering the body as an object, confers to the mind, a subjectivity that forms the essence of Man. However, Stelarc is not at all interested in the subjectivity. On the matter of subjectivity, Stelarc states: "It is no longer meaningful to see the body as a site for the psyche or the social, but rather as a structure to be monitored and modified - the body not as a subject but as an object – not an object of desire but as an object for designing." (6)

The stelarcian body is not performing to acquire a new identity. Its actions are not directed to produce meaning. The body exists in its particularity only when it functions according to the performance. The total abandonment of the psychic and social subjectivity implies a body that rests outside the Cartesian dualism. Stelarc deliberately leaves out the human emotions, desires, pains in his body projects, and he is working solely with the structure of the body. The objective here is to augment the capacities of the body without attributing it an identity, subjectivity. It is a bodily project and not the project of a duty outside the body.

Stelarcian body and the “body-subject”:

Even if Stelarc takes the “body as an object” at the beginning, the fact that he positions the body at the centre of all his problematic about the human existence, and observes what it becomes, directs us to the formulation of “I am a body” that refers to the notion of the “body-subject.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, puts the act of perception at the origin of the comprehension of the world. The perception of the subject occurs with the phenomenon of “being in the world”. This is the subject of a lived body, which is called the “body-subject.” Respectively, the activity on Earth is an aspect of the corporeality in its “being in the world.” This activity is accompanied with the play of sensations, in which the body is conceived as an interface of communication with the world.

The relation of the idea of the “body-subject” to the conception of the body in Stelarc is to be found on the matter of the senses. Stelarc challenges the perception by artificially stimulating the musculature. As in the performances of Fractal Flesh, Ping Body and ParaSite, the agency of the body is moved from the interior to the exterior of the body; the action and the sensation are separated. The senses gain a capacity of a telematic scale. The body as a sensible object is amplified. Its presence is augmented. New sensations are experienced by exteriorisation of the senses. The sensation is not reached by an action-perception as in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty which moves us away from the singularity of the body. The senses are stimulated by an external entity, be it other bodies or the web flow. The singularity of the body is transformed in multiplicity. The body abandons its state of the subject to become a collective site.

In Ping Body and ParaSite, the interaction occurs not only at the level of body to body, but of body to technological space. The body comprises the movement in this space. Therefore, the body is not included in the space; it is the space which is included in the body. As Derrick de Kerckhove implies, this phenomenon invites us to integrate the world in us in a different way than in the past. He talks of the “repositioning of the subject in the environment” with the integration of the world in the body. (7) While questioning the body, Stelarc seems to question also both approaches of the body by stating “as supposed free agents, the capabilities of “being a body” are constrained by “having a body.” (8)

Then, his performances seem to propose a body concerned not with “being in the world” but “becoming” the world. This is a world equipped with a technological structure open to a multiplicity of

operations. The body then exceeds the boundaries of an individual body. It allows for the invasion and interaction of other entities. The body traverses the subject state, giving way to a mobile and ephemeral collectivity. It becomes a collective site for performances. Thus, the body in performance with new technologies, fuses the two notions of the body, the “body as object” and the “body-subject,” to lead to an incessant process of “becoming.” This is a cyborgian becoming of a body in project.

The notion of “becoming” in Deleuze and Guattari:

“Becoming” is the engagement in transformation. With the new technologies, the transformation is not about meaning or form, but particularly about operation. This is what Deleuze and Guattari propose in *A Thousand Plateaux*, by the “rhizomatic” analysis.(9) It is a method focusing on the way it functions and what it becomes, rather than what it is or what it has.

In the context of Stelarc’s cyborgian performances, the body becomes an “assemblage” -in deleuzoguattarian terms-, capable of proliferating an infinity of operations. However, in order to achieve this capacity, it is essential that it first undergoes an effacement of subjective operation and then a process of opening for new operations. Stelarc fulfils this, first by the suspension events in which the body is retained, paralysed and deprived of its attributes, qualities and proprieties in order to recover many others through the operations it will execute. It then becomes an undefined entity, “a body without organ” –in deleuzian terms-, to which an infinity of external elements can be attached. The body is carried to a state of in-betweenness, of intermediary, like a nomad, characterized by movement and change. Its aim is to continue to move between the centres, like a cyborg that moves in transitions.

Stelarc starts out with the idea that the body is obsolete. He states: *“It is time to question whether a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1400cc brain is an adequate biological form. It cannot cope with the quantity, complexity and quality of information it has accumulated; it is intimidated by the precision, speed and power of technology and it is biologically ill-equipped to cope with its new extraterrestrial environment. ...”*(10)

Stelarc takes the body as a biological reality, examines it objectively, and determines in what way it is obsolete, particularly in the suspension events. Then, he experiments the ways to augment its capacities through his high-tech performances. Although, he states that the body is obsolete, his solutions are centred on the body. So, he is a strong follower of the ones who take the body with themselves while interacting with new technologies. This interaction puts the body in a constant process of “becoming.”

His suspension events are a strong confirmation of his argument that the body is obsolete. He hangs the body depriving it from the gravitational activities thus, assigning it the obsolete nature. The verb to suspend has the meanings of “to stop” and “to hang.” The second definition implies a physical state, to be held in the air. To be deprived of its contact with the ground means to remove the body of its

physical activities thus, to show the body's incapacities. The suspended body becomes immobile, inactive and deleted for a while. It is disconnected from the world, from his "being in the world." It is deactivated, unplugged.

This aspect of the body reflects the concept of the BwO of Deleuze and Guattari: "the BwO is the unproductive..." (11) There is a strong parallel between the BwO and the sewn suspensions in particular. In these events, the eyes and the mouth, as the organs of expression and communication are surgically sewn. As each organ creates a subjectivity by the operation it executes, the process of becoming requires, according to Stelarc, being freed of the subjectivity. Blocking the entrance and exit by sewing the mouth and the eyes implies a BwO. An organ as an instrument is the representative of a certain subjectivity. The organ constitutes the surface on which the subjectivity is viewed most openly. Then, to be deprived of the organs means to get rid of the subjectivity. The BwO is, then, a neutral body, a body at the zero degree. It is only through this state that the body can be opened to other connections. The subjectivity is left out when "being" is replaced by "becoming." That is the reason why Stelarc aims at a body without memory, without history, without meaning.

What is important to this "becoming" is that it does not end in fixing to another form of subjectivity. This would contradict its aim. "Becoming" is a constant process of being unfixed, undetermined, being neither this nor that, but to be held in the state of in-betweenness.

The suspension events seem to be a preparatory phase for the process of cyborgisation. Stretching the skin with hooks represents a preparation for a metamorphosis. And the possibility of stretching the skin proves that the skin is neither firm, nor permanent, nor immutable. It is rather flexible and mouldable, thus open to reconfigurations and to connexions that will mark its metamorphosis. This transformation of the body already indicates a certain degree of cyborgisation. The hook penetrating the skin is also a representative of the intrusion of technological prosthesis. The hook becomes the physical extension of the body.

The connectivity:

Stelarc proposes a new mode of instrumentalization, the "connectivity" of the body, while abandoning the identity, he declares: *"the body is designed to interface with its environment." ... "What is important today is no more the identity of the body but rather its connectivity – not its mobility or its location but its interface." ... "Consider a body remapped and reconfigured - not in genetic memory but rather in electronic circuitry."*(12)

The connectivity of the body presents a possibility to disconnect and to reconnect to another interface, which provides it with a bodily multiplicity. Stelarc proposes the connectivity as an artifice of embodiment, but it is an ephemeral and versatile embodiment, made possible through the plugging and unplugging of the body to technology. He has developed diverse strategies to concretise this.

Becoming through performance: An analysis of the strategies of Stelarc's performances:

The cyborgian strategies of "becoming" bring the body beyond the dichotomy of object/subject. Although "becoming" in the theories of Deleuze and Guattari is conceived as outside of biological reality, Stelarc concretises, in his performances, the concepts formulated around the notion of "becoming". He engages himself in these concepts materially.

In his Net-connected performances, Stelarc is using information as prosthesis. As Mark Dery articulates Stelarc transforms the Net from a means of transmission of information into a mode of execution of physical action.(13) Carole Hoffmann states similarly: "*The computer is envisaged as an extension and exteriorisation of the central nervous system which is the body. The computer is becoming a pseudo-organ.*"(14)

In *Ping Body* and *ParaSite*, by the fact of transmitting the web traffic into the body and translating it into movement, the body becomes a site. It integrates the web in itself. This sort of becoming refers to the relation between body and space in the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: "*Being a body is being entered in a certain world, and our body is not at first in the space: It is the space.*"(15) According to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, in the experience of the lived body, I am not separate from what I perceive. This idea is adaptable to the Net in general, as one perceives only when he is immersed in it. To perceive something is being absorbed by it. It is the opening of the body to the world.

The Net as an extension functions also as a site of the fulfilment of the notion of "deterritorialisation" that Deleuze and Guattari speaks of. Our relation to space and time changes due to electronic and digital prostheses. According to Stelarc, this deterritorialisation produces a psychological collapse in the perception of time and space. "*We have a different perception of the world than before*" says Stelarc in his interview made by Yannis Melanitis.(16) Carole Hoffmann articulates that "*it is actually possible, thanks to the computer, to travel geographically without travelling physically.*"(17) Similarly, Paul Virilio formulates as "*Going elsewhere without going anywhere.*"(18)

Stelarc achieves corporeal multiplicity and displacement through spatially separated but electronically connected to other bodies in other places. This notion derives from the schizophrenic cult of Post-structuralism due to the process of de-individuation, decentralisation, fragmentation of the self, as in the concept of the "body without organ." Stelarc achieves this process in *Fractal Flesh* by using the electronic connection and experiencing deterritorialisation of the intelligence of the body towards another.

Body as performance

Stelarc calls his performances "physical experience of ideas" in which "expression and experience are united" and the body becomes an "actual manifestation of a concept."(19) Brian Massumi names the stelarcian body, as "objectified sensible concept."(20) After having discussed in what ways the

stelarcian body is neither an object nor a subject, but that it launches itself into a process of deleuzoguattarian “becoming,” I propose the formulation of the “body as performance” in preference to the body as concept that Brian Massumi proposes.

“Becoming” is already a characteristic of performance. The body that becomes is a body as performance. Performance starts from an idea, a concept, but it is not exactly the concretisation of this idea because as soon as this idea is incorporated it becomes something else. The cyborgian process of “becoming” is not about fixity. Although a concept is definite, “becoming” is not. It is a process. Experiencing ideas corporeally does not make a body a concept. The concept can exist only at the level of the conceptualisation of strategies, at the level of starting the project, but it disappears at the level of realisation. It becomes a multiplicity of things. Thus, we can presume that Stelarc’s performances do not create a body as concept but a body as project. And this project is the performance.

About the “body without organ” Deleuze and Guattari state: *“It is not a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices.”*(21)

This statement reflects the stelarcian body for it is about a generation of a new body through performance. It is through the experimental performance that Stelarc produces a body. But, the body is not a fixed one. The body is “anticorps” (antibody). It is no longer a definite entity. It is a nomad wandering in-betweens. Through performance, the body becomes performance. There certainly remains a concept. On the other hand, the transformation is achieved through the practice. But what it becomes is not a representation of the concept, nor a concretisation of it. It is a performance of a continuous transformation. And this is a body that can only exist through the indefinite performance. Therefore, the body is not performed nor performing, but it is the performance itself.

Although the issues of performance studies are crucial for a diversity of other disciplines, it is rather difficult to define what performance is. The theories of Victor Turner, a leading character in the field of performance studies, are important in the analysis of the stelarcian body. He formulates a definition of performance in comparison with the “rites of passage.”(22) Underlying the transitory aspect of the rites of passage, Turner evokes the character of process and the state of in-betweenness of these rites, by emphasising “the function of transition between two states of cultural activities more stable and more conventional.” (23) This vision of performance sets it on the borders, in margin. This indicates the nomadism of performance in between, in indefinite spaces that reminds of the stelarcian body.

In the suspension events, the body suspends its terrestrial activities and is left in this state of in-betweenness, floating in the emptiness. It is detached of its state and this state is not replaced by another. The body is experienced in the emptiness in order to be isolated from every construction that would mark the stability of a state. Its structure is examined in its absence, in the course of transition. Stelarc’s suspended body, in its transitory aspect, resembles then to a performance.

In his Net-connected performances, the stelarcian body also floats in the digital circuit. It is a nomad of circuits, a passenger in transit. When it is connected, the body is suspended in the Net traffic. It is caught in the movement of the Internet and its constant flow. It is integrated in the circuit. It is the circuit. The body marks the transition. It is an intermediary among many entities, nets or bodies. In this respect, the stelarcian body is a body that makes itself a performance. Each connection creates a unique and indefinite body. The body becomes a site where other entities interact. It becomes the space for a game, a project, a performance. It is no longer the performance of the body. The performance is the body.

Another aspect of performance is the idea of game developed by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois.(23) Both of them tried to find a definition of performance by relating it to the functions of a game. A game is a site. It has its own rules. It marks moments of rupture, it is voluntary... The body has a capacity, then it has its own rules. The moments of rupture are the moments of connection and suspension. And the desire is of letting itself carried away through the transformation without resting on anywhere. It is about transiting without going anywhere, wandering at the borders.

Caillois emphasises the importance of the *alea* or chance, a characteristic of performance. This implies the random, the incertitude. It is an aspect that abolishes the stability of performance. Marvin Carlson remarks that the physical sensation leads to corporeal conscience that liberates the body from conventional structures of control and from signification.

Incertitude, ambiguity, eventuality are the traits that can be equally attributed to the stelarcian body, open to a multiplicity for the fact that it makes itself a site. This site is open to the alien operations. Multiple actions are fulfilled at this site. The body is transforming itself to the performance of a multiplicity. And this process is marked by a continuous and indefinite becoming.

Notes:

- (1) Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. Oxford University Press, 1993. p.34
- (2) William Gibson, *Neuromancer*. Ace Books, 1988
- (3) Susie Ramsay, "Bring your Body: The Dance Community and New Technologies." *Art and Technology Zone*
- (4) Susan Kozel, "Virtual Reality: Choreographing Cyberspace," *Dance Theatre Journal*, vol. 11, No. 2, p. 34-37 (Spring-Summer 1994)
- (5) Stelarc's website: www.stelarc.va.com.au
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) Derrick de Kerckhove, "Art, technologies du virtuel, et psychologie. L'élargissement du champ cognitive", *Netmagazine*
- (8) Stelarc's website
- (9) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Athlone, London, 1988
- (10) Stelarc's website
- (11) Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Univ. of Minnesota, 1998, p.8
- (12) Stelarc's website
- (13) Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1996
- (14) Carole Hoffmann, "Le réseau comme extension prothétique du corps." Publication électronique des actes des 1ères rencontres internationales, novembre 2000
- (15) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Gallimard, 1945, p.173
- (16) Yannis Melanitis, "Interview with Stelarc." 1999
- (17) Carole Hoffmann, "Le réseau comme extension prothétique du corps." Publication électronique des actes des 1ères rencontres internationales, novembre 2000
- (18) Paul Virilio, "Du corps profane au corps profane." *Art Press*, hors série no :12, 1991
- (19) Stelarc's website
- (20) Brian Massumi, "The Evolutionary Alchemy of Reason." *Cyberconf*
- (21) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Athlone, London, 1988
- (22) Marvin Carlson, *Performance. A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, 1996
- (23) Ibid.