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Introduction

The art of the body – one of the most captivating artistic phenomena of the 20th century’s close – has an equally fascinating prehistory, which, unrestricted to the past, continues to participate in the delimitation of the contemporary paradigm. A syndrome of issues, constitutes this prehistory and paradigm well over a hundred years in the making, which express the philosophical (especially epistemological) interest in the body. In the first half of the previous century, the awareness of ‘corporality’ as an aspect of perception began to develop, grounded in the knowledge of physiological conditions determining the process. According to Jonathan Crary (1990), the notion of subjective, body-dependent perception began to dominate as early as the 1820's and 30's. Gradually, it was becoming obvious that the truth concerning the world was psychosomatic in character. The next step in advancing this awareness was the conclusion that the senses could be manipulated by means of sundry external techniques. Furthermore, if the senses were controllable, then so was knowledge, the mind and the attitude towards the exterior. Knowledge about reality was revealed as a product of an active, externally stimulated and controlled subject, attempting, at best, to consciously fathom the functions, scope and implications of this control, as well as discern the instances that performed it.

Towards the end of the 19th century, progressing industrialization meant that the biosphere and the technosphere began to blend. This, in turn, resulted in an
intensification of processes that subjugated nature to human civilization, as well as in turning technology against man himself. What is meant by the latter is not merely a natural consequence of the former process (after all, mastering nature simultaneously affects man’s biological identity), but also, or perhaps predominantly, the developing phenomenon of body control (and, consequently, the surveillance of human life), described by Michel Foucault as biopower. The 20th century witnesses amplification in all the aforementioned processes.

It is in those processes, among others, that classic body art is rooted, with its usual argument for the body’s physicality. Especially the last decades of the preceding century brought a very distinct, multifaceted revival of artistic practices focused on the human body. Within this ‘somatic universe’, a special position was occupied by various types of performance art, and among them – first and foremost – body art.

Beginning with the 1960’s, the art of the body, often connected with conceptualism, became one of the main sources of the energy, which shaped the most radical forms of artistic expression. Already at its inception, through the works of such artists as Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci or Dennis Oppenheimer, body art claimed a permanent place in the history of artistic endeavors. The 1970’s bolstered its position with the practices of subsequent artists who ventured into this domain, e.g. Chris Burden, Gina Pane or the Vienna Actionists. Although in the following decade public attention was diverted by critics and art merchants towards very different forms of expression, this was in no way tantamount to a disappearance of, or even a decline in artistic attitudes which, like body art, employed the body as its basic (or sole) expressive means. It was during this period that the Australian artist Stelarc, who had debuted at the outset of the previous decade, continued to develop his artistic vision, consistently exploring the boundaries and possibilities of his own body.

Nonetheless, the output of this particular artist indicates that in the 1980’s a slow transformation may be observed in the art of the body. Since the very beginning of the decade (cf. e.g. the Deca-Dance performance in Komai Gallery, Tokyo, 10 November 1981), parallel to artistic events entailing the suspension of his own, physical, real body (by means of wires, attached with fish hooks to the skin), Stelarc undertook a series of
experiments in which he employed a specially designed robotic arm (the cycle of presentations entitled *The Third Hand*), thus transferring (extending) artistic practice into virtual expanses and simultaneously problematizing numerous, thus far universally accepted boundaries, conventions and notions.

**Towards the virtual body**

The transformations which body art began to undergo at the time can be interpreted as consequences (product) of at least a few processes, among which the following must be enumerated:

– the increasingly advanced development in media communication technologies described by Marshall McLuhan as extensions of the human body;
– the progress in scientific research, as well as applications thereof, in fields such as genetics, transplantology or robotics;
– the deepening of interdisciplinary studies (and, consequently, the emergence of such disciplines as bionics) as well as progress in experiments involving artificial intelligence and artificial life, rooted in the integrated scientific procedures mentioned above;
– the expansion of increasingly efficient computer technologies, ever more versatile in their application, constructing a world of which interactivity and virtuality are the basic attributes.

As a result of and in response to the emergence and development of the above phenomena (as well as numerous others, unmentioned here), a new civilizational-cultural formation began to take shape: a cyberculture, grounded in new notions concerning the character of life, a new outlook on the future of the human species and new relations between nature and civilization, art and science, as well as man and his products. More and more often, the belief in the permanence and immutability of human nature, characteristic for 18th century philosophers, was perceived as an obstacle in comprehending the contemporary world. Alterations of body and identity, as well as new concepts of life and intelligence, plainly indicate that our times are marked by incredibly deep and intense transformations of the world in which we exist. The
aforementioned fusing of technosphere and biosphere rapidly accelerated global hybridization, initiating the history of a post-biological era.

In art, especially in its radical formations, the development and increased use of electronic media technologies meant that various aspects of virtualized, processed and created corporality could conquer ever-newer areas.

These processes were already quite distinct in photography. Also, the cinematic avant-garde was always interested in issues related to corporality, particularly when it was voicing its objection to the appropriation of the body by manifold ideologies, as in the notable realizations of Luis Buñuel, Jean Genet, Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, Birgit Hein and Jayne Parker. Video art continued this tendency in an equally remarkable manner. Recently, computer animation – in its own peculiar way – has accepted the challenge of corporality: embracing the possibilities afforded by digital technologies, it constructs body simulacra.

In the 1990's, after a decade of apparent stillness, artistic tendencies addressing corporal issues underwent further intensification and dissemination. This time, however, artistic endeavors which, following in Stelarc's footsteps, transferred their interests, objects, tools as well as domains of activity and reference into virtual space, began to dominate, to determine the main directions of art's development and its dynamics, to formulate the basic problems and fundamental questions.

The above, however, is not tantamount to stating that art which limits its concerns to real physicality has lost its *raison d'être* in the contemporary world, or its ability to create significant values and meanings. The art of the virtual body directs us towards the future, discusses contemporaneity and physicality as seen in that particular perspective, while simultaneously questioning the biological boundaries of physicality and the ties of static identity. As an adventure of a body liberated (or being liberated) from biologicality, it also obliquely indicates the issues of a body mired in physicality as well as the weakness of a human individual, whose corporality renders him vulnerable to a variety of external threats. Thus, it announces the continuing existence of reasons for considering one's own physicality – not only fearing corporality, but also shielding it. It
reminds us that body talk invariably deserves an attentive ear, since it defines our existence and is therefore a vital complement to contemporary artistic discourses. The art of the real body, which emerges from this attention, concern or fear, possesses roots and extensive references which are existential as well as social, political, religious and philosophical in character. There are places on Earth where such anxieties and considerations are especially justified, although the perspective proposed by Foucault seems to demonstrate that the body will never find a secure refuge anywhere. Consequently, one may conclude that the value of penetrating virtual corporality is conditioned and co-shaped by explorations of physical corporality; moreover, the two domains invariably constitute essential contexts for each other.

The importance of McLuhan’s concept for contemplations of corporality lies not only in his accurate observation that communication media are an extension of man, i.e. both of his body and senses. Equally crucial is his conviction concerning man’s peculiar dependence on technology. According to his hypothesis, technology, by becoming part of the surroundings, begins to determine human consciousness and corporality. As a psychophysical whole, the human undergoes transformations induced by technology – he is transformed by his own inventions (this topic was later addressed by Derrick de Kerckhove). It is this process that can be observed at the outset of the post-biological era, i.e. the developing world, in which numerous aspects of life (including the mind and consciousness) are mediatized, expanded, transformed or created by technology. Art, evidently, is also part of that world.

The art of the virtual body formulates, enhances and analyzes its structures, tools as well as the resulting issues in this post-biological context, the vastness and internal diversity of which gives birth to a multitude of distinct artistic phenomena. Let us investigate two, the significance of which will allow the examination to disclose the most crucial issues of post-biological art.

**Virtualization as reclaiming the body**

Orlan and the project of transforming the body through a series of plastic surgery operations seemingly does not belong in the post-biological area: the direct object of
these actions is, after all, the physical, biological body. Nonetheless, at least two aspects of the venture call for circumspection and deliberation in formulating such an estimate.

The first is the origin of the form towards which Orlan turned in her escalating alterations, namely a computer-generated synthesis of the artist’s facial features and five classical painterly representations: Diana, Psyche, Europa, Venus and Mona Lisa. The endeavor at hand is thus an example of technological mediation, which combines an artistic idea with its concretization.

The post-biological character of Orlan’s enterprise is considerably more visible in the second aspect: the conviction, immanent in the project, that the body, apart from undergoing natural biological processes, can also become an object of actions which alter its form, shape its features, transcend its ‘natural destination’, on the way towards realizing the artistic vision.

Various works referencing corporality, artistic gestures aimed against one’s own body, undertaken by numerous artists (e.g. the self-destructive endeavors of the Vienna Actionists) were realized exclusively in the context of the real, physical body. The value of such endeavors, as well as the meanings produced and provoked thereby, also remained within the boundaries of reality and its metaphysical references. Orlan’s project, on the other hand, exceeds those limitations. Its space stretches from the real, biological body to the virtual one, from nature to technosphere, from commercialized patriarchal culture to cyberfeminism. Orlan’s project – apparently an attempt at reclaiming one’s own body, lost at birth – poses essential questions concerning the individual’s attitude towards their ‘own’ corporality, as well as the philosophical and social contexts of the issue.

Virtualization as transcending the body

The aforementioned Stelarc is certainly one of the most fascinating personages in the analyzed artistic field. After a sequence of multimedia enterprises, realized jointly in the late 1960’s, extended subsequently into a series of performance activities in which the artist analyzed the capabilities and restrictions of the physical body (his own, and,
consequently, the body in general) – suspending it in various manners, examining the boundary between one’s own physicality and the world – he initiated a long-lasting cycle of performances entitled *Amplified Body*. The primary matter of these presentations were the physiological processes occurring in Stelarc’s body, which – by means of impulses – shaped and directed the course of various events, forming the external structure of the performance (emitted sounds, light and video projections). Thus, the performance was transformed into a peculiar biotechnological environment, constituting in its entirety an extension of the artist’s body, which in turn became – as it were – an interface between the biological and the technological elements of the enterprise. One might also conclude – with very interesting results – that the entire performance becomes a biological-technological interface, or – as the flipside of the same phenomenon – a process of biological-technological communication. The movement of the impulses is also worth remarking, occurring as it does from the interior of the body towards the exterior. Combining the internal with the external, the whole process simultaneously problematizes the boundary between the two spheres.

Such attempts, in a different dimension, had been undertaken by Stelarc even earlier, leading to the (aforementioned) situation in which the skin, stretched as a result of the suspended body’s weight, revealed the fluidity (flexibility) of this boundary. A comparison of the two performance types not only visualizes the consistency which marks Stelarc’s work, but – predominantly - discloses the changes undergone by man in connection with the development of technologies mediating in his communication with the environment. In other words, it divulges the virtual dimensions of the human body.

In all endeavors comprising the *Amplified Body* sequence (as well as other, related ones), Stelarc employed medical equipment and technologies. This fact, apart from posing a variety of difficulties, clearly exposed the contemporary proximity of art and science (biology, physics, chemistry, etc), including its practical applications (medicine, therapy). A salient example of such multidisciplinary blending is *Stomach Sculpture*, a realization in which the artist utilized an endoscopy apparatus to place inside his abdomen an object regarded as a work of art. This fact, in the artist’s view, transformed the body itself, which consequently became exhibitory space, an art gallery of sorts.
Therefore, it transcended the divisions which delimit physiological, private and public spaces.

Stelarc’s ensuing performance activities introduced an array of new factors. In those works, the impulse stream was more often directed inward, rather than coming from the interior of the body. Computer-manipulated devices, employing specially prepared software, stimulated the body muscles, inducing movement. In recent enterprises, such as Ping Body, Stelarc utilized the Internet, thanks to which he could subject his body to distant stimuli (tele-stimulation). The first presentation of Ping Body, during which three sources (the Parisian Centre Georges Pompidou, Media Lab in Helsinki and Amsterdam) were connected to form one system, took place in November 1995, during the “Doors of Perception” Symposium. The stimulating impulses originating in all three places arrived in Luxemburg, where they activated a system which, in turn, manipulated Stelarc's body. This dimension of the Ping Body performance included behavior which was not controlled by the artist's consciousness. However, the presentation also included the Third Hand – an artificial extension of Stelarc's body, which the artist operated by means of abdominal and leg muscles. As a result, a communications system was established between the body and its technological environment, where the body, functioning in accordance with its natural features, could in an equally natural manner operate (steer) its technological (virtual) appendages, while being involuntarily, unwittingly subject to external inducement.

Compared to the previously realized Performances for Amplified Body, Robot and Third Hand, Ping Body is distinctive on account of its considerably augmented sphere (scope) of bidirectional communication. Taken all together, Stelarc’s works harmoniously express his idea of symbiosis between the biological and technological elements as a characteristic attribute of the contemporary world. Furthermore, they portray – as Annick Bureaud correctly indicates – the evolution of a body undergoing transformation from an interface into a hybrid form (Bureaud, 1995, p. 30).

In numerous remarks (e.g. Stelarc, 1991), the artist himself, evincing noteworthy awareness with regard to his art, developed and concretized his theories, paying considerable attention to, among others, the notion of the reduced, ‘obsolete body’. In
his opinion, man has created technological and informational environment which the body alone cannot hope to handle. Therefore, it needs the assistance of new electronic technologies which are capable of absorbing the functions that the human (his body) is unable to perform (see Stelarc, 1994).

The body, recognizing its fragility and diffidence, learns to regard itself as a structure subject to control and modification. As this tendency develops, technology ceases to be considered a mere environment or extension of corporality. Through miniaturization and biocompatibility, technology is transferred into the depths of the body, as if ‘implanted’. The physical body is transmogrified into a biological-technological body, one equipped with a substantial dimension of virtuality.

Apart from uniting the biological with the technological, Stelarc’s work also combines manifold artistic disciplines. In his version, performance art subsumes choreography, music, audiovisual arts and sculpture. Communicativeness, hybridity and virtuality become the essential properties of this artist’s output, which is tantamount to stating that they become the principal attributes of his body, regarded as an artistic medium.

**Artificial life and genuine identity?**

Contemporary tendencies in multimedia arts eagerly draw on the domain of artificial life. More and more often in art we encounter virtual bodies in the most extreme sense, i.e. bodies of artificial beings. The recipients acquire the ability to experience – in an artistic context – virtual corporality. Numerous works of this type offer either a semblance of interaction with entities which are autonomous in their reactions to our behavior, or an impression of communing with corporal worlds which exist independently of ours. Such enterprises can be found also in the domain of Internet art, which adds to the above a possibility of telematic contact with virtual bodies belonging to simulated creatures.

To conclude these remarks – a mere preface, obviously, to incomparably more elaborate studies, the necessity of which is validated by the rapidly growing importance of virtual
corporality issues in the contemporary world – I wish once again to address the matter of identity.

Telematic communication with virtual bodies, both those reduced from physicality to virtuality through technological mediatization and those created virtual (artificial creatures of the post-biological era, as well as technological extensions of biological physicality, new environments and, lastly, hybrid, bionic entities) – all that taken jointly problematizes not only the phenomenon of life and intelligence, but also – an obvious consequence – brings a crisis in the notion of identity. Nowadays, we cannot indulge in an ingenuous discussion of harmony and conflict between identities, or of the autonomy of subjectivity, since the transformations of the universe confront us with the issues of wired identity (Druckerey, 1994), as well as the problems of collective consciousness and collective intelligence. Today, the countless quandaries accompanying the transformations mentioned above are commonly expressed even by those whose estimations have attended these processes closely. As an example, let us consider the opinion of Arthur Elsenaar and Eric Kluitenberg (1994): “The technologization of the human body implies a conceptual abstraction that destroys the integrity of the physical experience. Destroying the duality between the physical and the spiritual, it also undermines the traditional opposition of culture and nature. Our cultural customs, our habits, our behavior all become mechanisms, to be altered at will in order to make the world-machine run smoothly. It raises an anxious uncertainty about the question: What does it mean to be human?”. This particular question – devoid of prejudice and naïve optimism – is constantly being formulated by the practitioners of virtual body art.

Bibliography

