

Exploits of the skin trade:
the ascent of *post*-humanism

Darren Tofts

The space seems uncannily large, despite the darkness. The only light emanates from the disembodied head that hovers before me, unencumbered of the need for a body. Am I projecting a predictable anthropomorphism, or does it *seem* to be asleep? As if aware of my presence, it stirs into improbable life. I ask its name using the keyboard, the only visible sign of technology in the room. "I am Stelarc". The conundrum is now complete. The artist that goes by that name stands behind me somewhere in the dark, observing whatever is about to happen. I pause to hear the signature laugh. Instead the partial body double asks my name. Is it sophistry or alchemy at work here, as the staid algorithmic formula of call and response takes on the richer nuances of a dialogue. But a dialogue with whom?

A semantic blurring of data-base and fuzzy logic, Stelarc's *Prosthetic Head* (2003-ongoing) continues the artist's interest in questioning notions of embodiment, intelligence and agency. The voice is granular, synthetic yet disturbingly knowing and suggestive of a higher intelligence to come. When I first encounter it in 2004 its conversational range is narrow, yet its personality is complex, even schizoid, identifying itself as both artist and artificial agent. A few years later I see video of it discoursing in Second Life on the theme of *post*-humanism. What a nerve.

Stelarc deconstructs the body in the truest sense of the term, not as a critical or interpretive act performed upon it, but as a series of speculative interventions enacted from within embodiment itself. The philosophical work of deconstruction is concerned with *avenir*, that which is to come. It is this imminence, of the body as unfinished, a verbal, iterative state of becoming, which constitutes Stelarc's ongoing *body of work*. From the remotely actuated and internet driven, fractal flesh performances of the 1990s (*Fractal Flesh, Ping Body & Parasite*) to his most recent exploration of phantom flesh, *Ear on Arm* (2006-ongoing), Stelarc stretches the limits of anatomical architectures in response to the ambient conditions of remote sensing and mediated co-presence; habits that, for the human race, are rapidly becoming second nature.

In constructing the *Prosthetic Head*, part of the body's largest organ, the skin, was photographed and rendered digitally to map a semblance of the artist's face on to the polygonal endoskeleton of the artificially intelligent agent. This virtual countenance is indeed familiar and completes the illusion of a body double. The idea of grafting a facet of the body elsewhere also gestures to the aberrant ear currently being constructed and stem cell grown on the artist's left forearm, a growth which, under other circumstances, would be surgically removed. In the 1940s Antonin Artaud wanted to evacuate the body of its organs as an act of defiant liberation, in the name of the theatre of cruelty. Stelarc seeks to supplement it with an excess of organs that only makes sense in the atrocity exhibition or the age of techno-biological reality. Both projects, of evisceration and

transplantation, take place on operating tables that, in their own time, will become mediated events of radio, television and photography.

Ear on Arm is a speculative evolutionary prototype. It gestures to the possibility of an intimate soft prosthesis for the age of *post*-humanism, with its dual inflection of that which is to come after the anatomical body has run its course, as well as its seamless integration into networked ecologies. In the age of mobility, the next killer app won't be a gadget but a wireless capable organ "for other bodies in other places, enabling people to locate and listen to another body elsewhere". I'm pretty sure that Stelarc, not his virtual prosthesis, said that.

In 1964 Marshall McLuhan prophesied this confluence of flesh and ubiquitous communications when he asserted that in the "electric age we wear all mankind as our skin". Skin is the homeostatic barrier and interface between our inner and outer relations to the world. Its familiar extensions (clothing, housing and cities) are now morphing into prosthetic ears and heads. *Ear on Arm* suggests a new socio-linguistics of the body, a somatic metonymy in which body part (ear, head) or individual simultaneously becomes the whole. In that emergent lump of Bluetooth enabled flesh we glimpse an image of the future – as did Alexander Graham Bell when he spoke to Thomas Watson over the telephone for the first time in 1876 – when no individual will be out of earshot.

Avenir. A veneer. The digital visage used to personify the Prosthetic Head is, in this exhibition, repurposed as a landscape of stretched skin. Its sheer scale resembles an ancient ordnance survey of the known world and its life forms, like the cave paintings at Lascaux. A digital life-mask of the familiar hovering above the floor, it also announces, in advance, the ascent of *post*-humanism. Like a palimpsest etched with multiple writings on its surface, it reveals the traces of a hybrid ancestor, *Partial Head* (2006), in which its superimposition over a hominid skull creates a post-hominid, pre-human third face. Dr Bronowski certainly missed that one.

Like Narcissus, who admired and fell in love with his own image, the artist's face is mirrored, reflected back on itself. Proliferating beyond its own margins, even the need to remain whole, it resembles proud flesh in a wound, growing at speeds in excess of its ability to heal. For the *post*-human such redundant acceleration is to be encouraged rather than cured. Something of this pride is glimpsed in the *Ear on Arm* casts. Dismembered, they have jettisoned the body and multiplied as clones. Obscure objects of desire, they realize in another medium the incomplete prosthesis hosted by their creator. They gesture to the self-conscious poise and display of the body-builder's vogue and their solipsistic fascination with body parts as spectacle. They rehearse, too, the ages of human technological sophistication from the alchemical transformation of fundamental materials like flint and sand into glass, to the mastery of metals, such as bronze.

Before you are just some of the trials of life from bio to BIOS. Jacob Bronowski described the human species' ascent and Marshall McLuhan was the sage of its extensions, but Stelarc is without question the most audacious architect of its *post*-human consequences.

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