



Ear on Arm, 2011, installation view Lorne Sculpture 2011

All images this article of work by Stelarc; images courtesy the artist and Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne.

Stelarc

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On the morning after the storm the body of the drowned giant was washed ashore on the beach five miles to the north-west of the city . . . I took up my position directly opposite the giant's head, from where I could see the new arrivals and the children clambering over the legs and arms. (J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned Giant*, 1964)

'It' appeared to have been washed up on shore, not unlike the ancient hybrids of early map-making, the centaurs and the Cyclops and the Minotaur, a thing from another, post-future, realm. A colossal arm made all the more peculiar by its all-listening ear, perching like a perfectly formed fungal growth from its forearm.

This already peculiar entity was made all the more odd by the appearance of a naked man who mounted the arm and embraced it in some kind of bizarre lover's clinch, and was then somewhat ritualistically coated in a layer of white clay. One soon realised that the naked man also had a fully-formed human ear protruding from his left arm. David Lynch would have had a field day.

'The Lorne performance was aesthetically about counterpointing the scale of the body with the scale of a large fragment of the body that was the sculpture,' Stelarc says of the event.

The white body better coupled with the white sculpture. The duration of the Lorne performance was approximately forty-five minutes. It took about fifteen minutes to smear the body with white clay (which cracked from my body heat). After thirty minutes people were asked to leave. It was very cold. . .

Stelarc never does things by halves. The four-metre sculpture and accompanying performance was arguably the

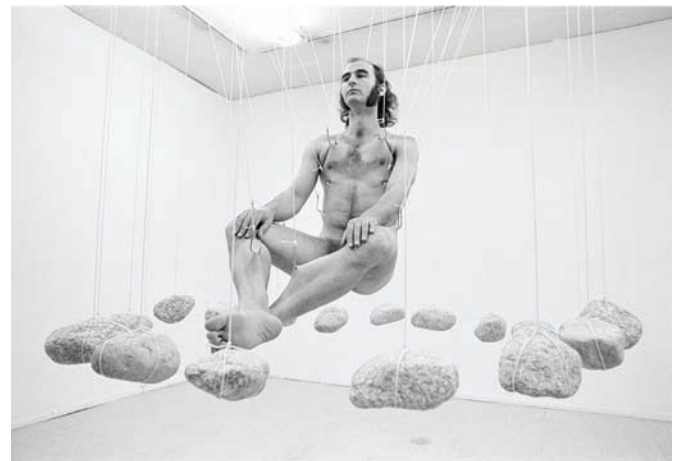
highlight of the Lorne Sculpture Biennale in 2011, and re-emerged as a central motif in Stelarc's 2012 exhibition at Melbourne's Scott Livesey Galleries last month.

With the intention to install the ear with a WiFi connection, *The Ear On Arm* project began in 1996 and was not without its procedural difficulties. Many surgeons rejected the artist's request, feeling that this was taking cosmetic surgery a step too far. 'It's taking a long time to fully realise,' Stelarc says.

The large sculpture was a way of actualising the idea in an impressive scale and giving it a physical presence. It was also a way of exhibiting the project in the absence of the artist. The idea is expressed in an alternate way but the sculpture is only meaningful because there's an ear at present being surgically constructed and cell grown on my arm. And amputating the arm with the ear for exhibiting it is not a present option, ha, ha, ha . . .

As well as the sculpture, Stelarc's March show featured documentation of his twenty-five suspension performances executed between 1978 and 1988 in which the artist, or rather, in Stelarc's parlance 'The Body,' was levitated via steel hooks in locations ranging from the Japanese coast to New York City. Inevitably, these were pre-digital days and the events were largely captured in black-and-white film, giving the resulting prints on show a strangely nostalgic feel. Accordingly, in a privately staged event early March, Stelarc revisited the 'Suspension', this time hovering above the *Ear on Arm* sculpture in Melbourne's Scott Livesey Galleries.

Twenty-four years after his last Suspension, and admitting to a degree of trepidation, Stelarc states that his rationale is not



simply a re-performance.

Unless the conceptual *raison d'être* for doing this was a strong one, there would not have been this attempt. It is not about doing 'another suspension', not about 'suspending again'. That's not what I consider a meaningful assertion. It's rather that the *Ear On Arm* sculpture has prompted a suspension; a present work looping back to a previous performance strategy that will expose the physicality of the *Ear On Arm* project and reanimate the past suspensions' images. The skin has always been a site for stretching and interrogation and continues to be, albeit in differing ways.

'The dispassionate reference to "the body" here bristles with the artist's dogged resistance to the use of any variation of the first person pronoun when referring to himself in performance,' notes Darren Tofts in the accompanying catalogue.

'While objectified the suspended body is also liberated, free of the earth-bound tyranny of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, beyond the material necessity of movement through the work of its own locomotion,' writes Tofts. 'Achieving a temporary escape velocity it is already on the way to becoming something else, a virtual body capable of flow across networks without the need for wires and hooks.'

Famed cyber-novelist William Gibson, writing in his 2012 collection of essays *Distrust That Particular Flavor*, wrote of meeting Stelarc in Melbourne:

... he struck me as one of the calmest people I'd ever met. He resembled a younger J.G. Ballard, it seemed to me, another utterly conventional-looking man whose deeply unconventional ideas have taken him to singular destinations. Ballard's destinations, however, have been fictional, and Stelarc's are often physical, and sometimes seem to include the possibility of terminality ...

Indeed, watching a man suffer the insertion of sixteen shark hooks into his flesh *sans* painkillers is in itself an extreme experience. But so too was watching the artist allow himself to be electrocuted via anonymous Internet users at a performance in Sydney's Artspace, or talking to him about swallowing his infamous *Stomach Sculpture*, the story itself enough to trigger gag reflex in any normal human being. But Stelarc is not normal. He allows his art and the Body of which it is often made, to take him to conceptual, mental, philosophical and physical extremes. It is what makes him.

Stelarc 'Suspensions' was shown at Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne, 7 to 31 March 2012. www.scottliveseygalleries.com

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clockwise from top left: 1/ *City Suspension*: Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, 28 June 1985; photo: Morten Schandorf, 175 x 120cm

2/ Stelarc 'Suspension' performance, Melbourne, March 2012, in association with the exhibition Stelarc 'Suspensions', 2012, Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne,

3/ *Sitting/Swaying*. Event for *Rock Suspension* Tamura Gallery, Tokyo, 11 May 1980; photo: Kenji Nozawa, 120 x 175cm

4/ Stelarc atop his *Ear on Arm* sculpture as part of his commissioned performance for *Lorne Sculpture* 2011