

Fluent Field of Conceptual Movement: Stelarc's Internet Ear in the Wet Zone

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Our understanding of humanity based on that we have full control over 'our' world and culture, and 'our selves', is in a crisis.

This does not mean we are going down or disappear, but rather that we need to sense human beings, ourselves, and our role in some new ways. There are opportunities in crisis: It opens up new discoveries and insights - and, not least, new ways to recognize and gain insight.

This involves several levels of the human 'sphere' of which I may only elaborate on some of them here: The body, subjectivity, art and context.

Let us revisit the body.

In the wet zone a body is not 'just' a body. A body is both physical and virtual. The body is stasis and movement, solid and liquid; thought and feeling; a paradox, it seems, for the philosopher – and for the human sciences.

The body is not 'itself'. It is not useful as general reference framework for understanding the world. The body is "obsolete", in the words of Stelarc whereby he expresses the belief that as a static entity in a soul-and-body dichotomy without paradoxical implications and (self) relationships, the body is antiquated. Outdated.

A new situation emerges in the wet zone. A transformative movement, according to Brian Massumi, that is both affective (acting physically) and sentient, seems to take its place. Or: Should. I will return to this point later. Therefore, the question is to find out what may substitute the obsolescence of (our perception and use of) the body? Or rather, what the body THEN 'is' or 'mean'?

Stelarc seems to insist that there are no dichotomies, when it comes to the body. The body is not something we can relate to exclusively as 'outside' (or 'inside', for that matter). This is because we ARE bodies - which again means that the body is both 'meat' and 'idea' when we perceive (it). Hence, he speaks about the body as a 'physical experience of Ideas' – here understood as a kind of natural conception process. Brian Massumi, whom to my ears have understood Stelarc's particular interest in

renegotiating our conceptual mental apparatus best of all, describes it this way: The body as Stelarc medium, is a 'sentient concept.' (Massumi, 2002, p. 90)

The challenge is to write the re-joining of body and thought that Stelarc performs. This requires the willingness to revisit some of our basic notions of what a body is and does as an acting, perceiving, thinking, feeling thing.

When I refer to the 'body' in the following, I also imply 'thinking'. And when body and mind are combined, then we are looking at the issue of perception and subjectivity.

According to Brian Massumi, perception and thinking is a continuum in the conceptual performances of Stelarc (p. 92). The two cannot be separated, but are extremes in the same process. However, they are exactly that: extremes, that we are able to use – 'go to extremes', as we say.

This is a shared feature of the artists in BIOTOPIA-exhibition: Going to the extremes, but never crossing the fine line of absurdity or nonsense. The issues are examined scientifically.

Often, it is technology that exposes human in new situations, which facilitate the enhancement of philosophical studies of 'ourselves' and our phenomena (however not as a 'creation' of something 'new' - which is considerably more complex affair that makes new phenomena and representations outside the existing representation framework, appear (emerge)). We will never be able to see the world as one thing or perceive it as a panorama where we may only describe it within a fixed frame - and from a static point. The point of Biotopia is to point out how things are moving out of their fixed frames. Things should not be seen as phenomena experienced by a subject 'outside' the phenomena, but as a result of one, so to speak, collaborative experience horizon, where body and mind interact in affective and sensitive processes. We need to move with things to try to understand them. The exploration of the body by art as both the transformer of flesh and ideas is one of the means at our disposal to achieve such conceptual movement.

Let me therefore turn to the perhaps most challenging part of Stelarc's practice: art - and its relation to science. It is part of the conceptual idea of Internet Ear to ask questions about the role of the humanities in the wet zone.

More than anything, Internet Ear addresses the questions of what happens to art in an age where technological and biological life forms challenge each other and establish even closer relations to each other? Biotopia examines how art evolves in this new situation, exposed (or inserted?) (In)to a situation between bits and atoms, where very media-savvy-but-not-so-media-conscious, post digital humans

move about. It is this situation which, very briefly defined, constitutes the 'wet zone' - a fluent field of conceptual movement.

... part of the idea is to put the humanities in a position of having continually to renegotiate their relations with the sciences – and, in the process, to rearticulate what is unique to their own capacities...

Which brings us to the contexts. Things challenge us. Our gaze is the object of others' gazes. Things look at us, but always escape a direct and comprehensive look-of-deep-'understanding'. We are watching ourselves, as in Mogens Jacobsen's Group Without You. The technology makes it possible to monitor everyone, but according to Jacobsen there is no 'center' in this surveillance, or what the French (wet) philosopher Michel Foucault called the "Panopticon" (Michel Foucault, Crime and Punishment, p. 168); the ubiquitous gaze of media and technology.

"... The study of something I loosely called bio power, namely all the mechanisms through which what constitutes human species 'basic biological features may be included in a policy of a political strategy or general power strategy." (Michel Foucault, Quote from a speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, 1982)

It is long since we have transgressed the border of the humanistic Renaissance project 'Utopia' as Thomas Moore formulated it - and Shakespeare poetically refined in 'The Tempest': The society, in which everything is in balance and there are no wars or suffering. It is idealism, and an ideal, that has driven people from religion to science in a constant search for excellence. Today, utopia is probably best left as a naive thought, something unattainable. Man's position in this thought, and idealism's status, forms the background for several decades of critique of humanism - and especially its fundamental dualistic view of the world (nature / culture, true / false etc.)

The wet zone could be seen as a metaphor for the basis of objective knowledge, which in its capacity to be constantly changing eludes any fixed categorization or "dualist" analysis. Conversely Internet Ear invites openness towards a 'plurality' of possible angles and analysis - what within some scientific thinking is called 'emergence' of the real

Like the exhibition-title 'Biotopia', Internet Ear denotes a movement of people, technology and art into a wet zone in which dualisms may be dissolved, but also answered or replaced with other countermeasures, and - maybe – some hope? The art works in that sense designates 'emergences' in the fluent field; well planned attempts to practice in the wet zone.

The 'wet' aesthetics is very much not 'just' worn by a 'digital' art, but by the question of what happens when technology and human science really work? Is the artist the new scientist - or vice versa? Through Internet Ear, Stelarc is asking this question – and in the process seeks to mirror the current iterations of the human sciences in the wet condition. Neither a promise of a new Utopia, nor a singular event of strange Biotopes easily forgotten, Internet Ear rearticulates what is unique in the emergent wet zone in the intersections of artistic and scientific practice today.