

CYBORG POLITICS;

The Role of Gender and Biopolitics in Posthumanist Art

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I. Introduction - the Human Form

One of the seminal motivations behind many creative practices is the desire to create life. This goal is more central to certain schools of art and methods of creation than others; within these practices, the aspiration to modify organic life or create artificial life usually manifests through the modification of representations of life. However, the advent of modern technology has catalyzed an increase in attempts to realize this objective.

An intimate understanding of the human form is a prerequisite for the artist to recreate life, as the human form is the most accessible device for the comprehensive and subjective experience of life. In art, this has led to a focus on developing increasingly accurate representations of the human form, and subsequently altering this form for artistic expression. As previously stated, while artists have historically implemented this by modifying symbols of the human body, they are now exploring the body itself as a medium.

The invention of biological imaging (that was primarily implemented in medicine), combined with a general development in mechanical and computing technologies, has allowed for the two modern translations of the human form which will serve as the focus of this essay: physical body to cyberbody, and organic body to cyborg.

II. Posthumanist Cyberfeminism and Transhumanism

Posthumanism is a branch of cultural theory that endeavors to deconstruct traditional notions of human life and identity, and to produce multidimensional redefinitions of these notions. The multidimensional aspect refers to the intersectionality of posthumanist discourse, which incorporates in its approach contemporary, liberal understandings of technology,

sexuality, gender, race, class, and more. This contrasts against other fields of cultural theory that share the same objectives.

Transhumanism is a similar intellectual movement that aims to improve the human condition and transcend biological limitations through technology. Transhumanism examines the implementation of this theory and the ethics implied in them.¹ The discourse surrounding the human form that this essay considers mainly falls under the umbrella of posthumanism, while the implementations of these theories in art pieces (for example, cyborg and cyberbody art) can be considered transhuman, as they actively transform the human condition.

It is a trope in feminist discourse that bodies have politics. Additionally, it has (perhaps more recently) been established that artifacts have politics²--cultural and technological artifacts carry either intended or unintentional (and usually unpredictable) political implications. Therefore, it follows that the cyborg--the cybernetic organism, a living entity composed of both natural biological parts and mechanical or technological parts--unavoidably carries political implications, both embedded in its history and implied in its design.

III. The Cyborg

Cyborgs are creatures birthed by the field of cybernetics. In 1948, mathematician and philosopher Norbert Wiener coined the term "cybernetics" as "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine"³. A cyborg is the fusion of animal and machine; as such, it yields interesting effects on established cybernetic understandings of control and communication.

¹ Bostrom, Nick. "A HISTORY OF TRANSHUMANIST THOUGHT." *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14, no. 1 (April 2005).

² Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts have Politics?" *Daedalus*, Winter 1980.

³ Wiener, Norbert. *Cybernetics or control and communication in the animal and the machine, second edition*. New York: Wiley, 1961.

Cyborgs inhabit the border between reality and myth. An estimated 10% of the American population consists of cyborgs in the technical sense (for example, a person with a mechanical body modification such as a hearing aid, pacemaker, or prosthetic body part)⁴. Their image has also proliferated in the field of science fiction, from NDR--a robot that begins to alter itself with biological components--of Isaac Asimov's short story *the Bicentennial Man*, to more sensational representations such as Darth Vader of the Star Wars franchise. Both versions have instituted cyborgs as a staple of science fiction.

Addressing the cultural icon of the cyborg as the patriarchal trope of a "space cowboy", Donna Haraway appropriated this image in her *Cyborg Manifesto*⁵. In the essay, Haraway details the political and social features of a cyborg world as metaphor for a feminist posthumanist utopia which has transcended the boundaries of the traditional institutions of gender, feminism, and politics. Her choice of the cyborg as metaphor for the identity of a posthumanist feminist was a radical stance of intersectional feminism. By definition, cyborgs transcend the boundary between animal and machine, and can exist with infinite possible constructions. Duality is not inherent to the cyborg identity (or feminist perspective); this is a departure from the traditional feminist philosophies to which she is responding. These philosophies do not explicitly contest the gender binary as a structure that is a product of and reinforced by hetero-patriarchal oppression, and should therefore not be considered a unifying category for feminists.

In line with the posthumanist tendency of intersectionality, Haraway deconstructs identities based in class and politics, linking them by their reliance on an Other. She asserts that

⁴ "What is a Cyborg?" Cyborg Anthropology. December 24, 2010. Accessed April 17, 2017. http://cyborganthropology.com/What_is_a_Cyborg%3F.

⁵ Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991.

this reliance is precarious for two reasons: the border separating one from Other is established by the hetero-patriarchal structure for the benefit of a portion of its members at the expense of the rest, and the boundary is constantly shifting. The vaguely defined border separating man and machine within the cyborg identity parallels the distorted boundary between one and Other in her proposal.

IV. Stelarc

Stelarc (born Stelios Arcadiou) is a Cyprus-born Australian performance artists whose work explores transhumanist themes. During his performances, he usually dons robotic bodily additions which he creates himself--temporarily achieving cyborg status--and frequently engages in feats of endurance.

Stelarc's views of the body and his motivations for engaging in the concept of the cyborg differ greatly from those of Haraway. He is strictly utilitarian in his valuations of the body, and a central theme of his work is the human body's obsolescence. He views it as solely "evolutionary architecture"⁶, and as such, its features can be optimized for aesthetic and functional purposes.

Stelarc's most widely recognized performance device is the Third Hand--a robotic hand created in 1980 that attached to Stelarc's right arm and moved independently of his other two hands. The hand's motion was directed by EMG (electromyographic) signals transmitted from sensors attached to his abdomen and legs. It was originally designed to be a semi-permanent attachment to the body, but due to discomfort it has only been used as a performance piece.⁷

Through his choice of a third hand worn parallel to his other hands as the performance piece, Stelarc proposes an expansion of the perceived function of mechanical prosthetics; rather

⁶ Stelarc, and Marquard Smith. "Animating Bodie, Mobilizing Technologies: Stelarc in Conversation." In *Stelarc*, 215-42. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

⁷ STELARC | THIRD HAND. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20265>.

than solely serving as replacements for body parts, they can augment the body and expand its functioning.



A more recent performance was *Re-Wired / Re-Mixed: Event for Dismembered Body*, which occurred from 3-7 August 2015 as part of the “Radical Ecologies” exhibit at PICA, Perth. He built a structure to tether his body in place and feed him remotely sourced contradictory audio and video streams. An exoskeletal arm was attached to the structure--when worn, the arm’s motions could be controlled by anyone in the world through an online interface. There was also a touchscreen in the museum next to the structure, so viewers who were

Figure 1: Stelarc, Third Hand (1980) physically present could interact with the piece and control the arm. He used the piece for an endurance performance, wearing it for six hours a day over five consecutive days. The audio and video were live streams were of what a hypothetical person in two cities--New York City and London, respectively--could be hearing and seeing.

Re-Wired / Re-Mixed directly explored the central themes of cybernetics--communication and control. Stelarc created a fractured experience of the body composed of incongruous sensory parts and subject to constant surveillance and involuntary control. The cyborg’s constitution in this performance drastically diverges from that of the *Third Hand* cyborg. The power dynamic of bodily control among the materially separate parts of the



Figure 2: Re-Wired / Re-Mixed: Event for Dismembered Body (2015)

cyborg were balanced and unifying in the Third Hand, and encouraged a wider acceptance of the cyborg concept as a possible reality; a prominent moment of one of the Third Hand performances was when Stelarc wrote “EVOLUTION” using all three hands simultaneously. In *Re-Wired / Re-Mixed*, this power dynamic was characterized by a severe asymmetry--the introduction of surveillance and anonymous control has political undertones, and instead of augmenting his bodily experience, he seems ominously dispossessed of it.

Stelarc’s performances are characterized by an apathetic approach. He rejects pain and emotion as subjects of his art, (although they are certainly unavoidable in his performances, especially his endurance pieces). By disregarding emotion, movement seems to lose its intention. This implies remote control, which is featured explicitly in some of his works (including *Re-Wired / Re-Mixed*). When performances with such strong political undertones such as *Re-Wired / Re-Mixed* are soaked in indifference, they become bound in ambiguity. He

intentionally chooses this so the viewer can more freely explore the topics of control, communication, and power.

V. VNS Matrix

VNS Matrix was a cyberfeminist artist collective formed in Adelaide, Australia in 1991, and disbanded in 1997. The collective consisted of four members: Virginia Barratt, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini, and Josephine Starrs. Their work explored the inherently gendered power structures of newly developing technology, and consisted of a wide range of media, including video art, video games, magazines, events, and posters.

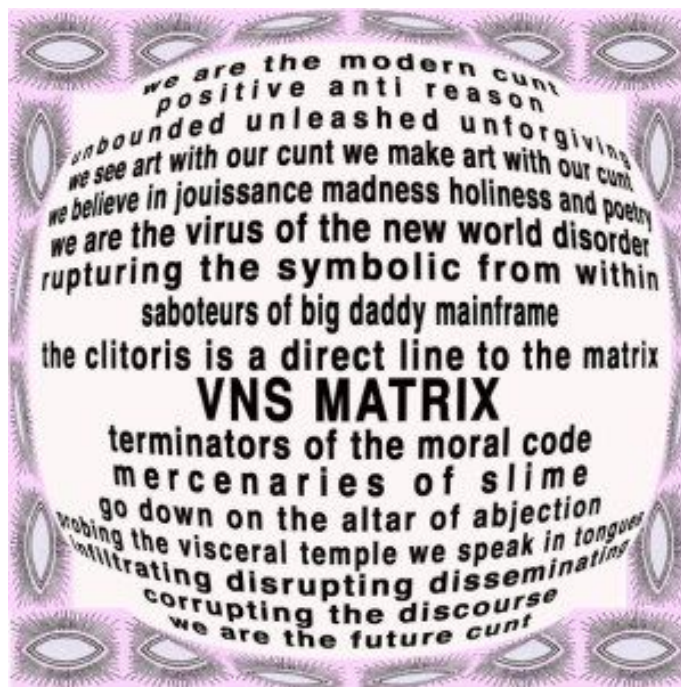


Figure 3: A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century (1991)

Their manifesto, entitled “A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century”, utilized crass language and ironic references to Western philosophy to create shock value which allowed it to spread virally through both physical copies and virtual ones. The term “cyberfeminism” was coined in their manifesto and popularized with the spread of the work.

They frequently employed explicitly sexual imagery and language in their works--much of their video art and video games were dependent on viral symbology, and one of their main aims was to “infect the cyberspace with bodily fluids”. Their popular video game All New

Gen allowed the player, with the aid of the renegade DNA Sluts, to battle patriarchal forces of cyberspace, including “Big Daddy Mainframe”--alluding to the male-dominated culture in the hardware and software fields at the time and their associations with the military-industrial complex and conservative capitalist agenda.⁸

VNS Matrix represents the fusion of the human form with technology through cyberbody art, as opposed to cyborg art. Rather than retrofitting the physical body with mechanical additions, they metaphorically translate human components from biological to virtual. This is exemplified through the viral metaphors cunt imagery in their static visual art (Figure 3), as well as their video games.

VII. Comparison of Implementations

Comparing Stelarc’s cyborg art with the cyberbody art of VNS Matrix yields both interesting parallels and glaring contrasts. Both artists share the basic goal of representing the human form in a manner that is reflective of their respective posthuman ideals; however, many aspects of these ideals are nonoverlapping.

Both artists share the view that technology is an environmental factor with which humans can merge, but is not an entity itself. Stelarc expresses this through his representation of technology in performance as mechanical parts that are incomplete without a human participant; VNS Matrix expresses the same sentiment by representing technology as cyberspace, a matrix in which humans virtually exist.

The artists’ divergence in the form the body takes in their art parallels a divergence in their visions for the future of the human form, as well as in their implied perception of the

⁸ "All New Gen." VNS matrix. August 23, 2016. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://vnsmatrix.net/all-new-gen/>.

current relationship between technology and the body. VNS Matrix presents the body as not only highly relevant to cyberspace, but as aggressively inhabiting it. The omission of physical body modifications in their art--coupled with their viral symbolism and metaphors of infection--suggest that the current (as well as their desired) relationship between the body and technology is one that empowers the body more than technology. The physical aspects of the human form (which are symbolized through bodily fluids, genitalia, and other weapons in their biological arsenal) are so potent and fecund that they are virtually intrusive into cyberspace.

Stelarc has explicitly expressed that the body is obsolete, and that the fusion of the body with technology is the only way for humans to escape this obsolescence. This view is a tech-positive response to previous iterations of the cyborg in science fiction as members of dystopic futures sprung from technological paranoia; his presentation of technological modifications as augmentations are hopeful and idealistic. However, his total rejection of the body and frequent referral to evolution and obsolescence demonstrate a basic misunderstanding of Darwinian evolution, and is a misuse of analogy. This is of importance, as it is an analogy he frequently employs to rationalize his perspective on the body (which his work is based upon). Darwinian evolution refers to large-scale changes made to an entire population over time which are dependent on two main factors: competition due to a scarcity of resources, and adaptations to environments made over many generations. Stelarc's work does not touch upon the topic of scarcity or competition, and he does not offer any concrete vision of how his innovations would affect whole human populations. His claim that the body is obsolete would be more legitimate had he not justified it by conflating it with a vague and inaccurate notion of evolution; this lends

a baseless utopian flavor to his work, and suggests that his theories are more deeply rooted in science fiction than in a critical social theory of modern technology.

VII. Comparison of Theories

The social context of VNS Matrix's work is equally complex--while they claim that their manifesto was derived from Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, their consistent use of cunt metaphors and emphasis on biologically female genitalia, while intended to radically oppose the notion that the vagina represents maternity by reclaiming it as primarily a source of libidinal pleasure, is transgender-exclusionary. It does not parallel Haraway's total rejection of any unity or true liberation within a biologically-derived gender system, which was a central point in Haraway's essay. However, their work was important in situating women within the quickly expanding electronic culture of the 1990s. They identified that this culture was female-exclusionary in its nascent stage and drew attention to it, while simultaneously creating a space for women in an attempt to proactively prevent their marginalization. These exclusionary aspects were inherited from the intellectual fields that birthed electronic computing culture--science, philosophy, and science fiction: the same historical context that much of Stelarc's work draws upon.

Another point of contrast between the two artists is the role of emotion and intimacy in their work. Stelarc's practice of avoiding or rejecting the topics of emotion and intimacy stand in stark contrast to the VNS Matrix's practice of utilizing the shock value of their radical feminist language and imagery to elicit emotional reactions from the audience. VNS Matrix's biological symbolism is a vehicle for the transmission of intimacy into the cyberspace. Stelarc, however, is

more concerned with exploring “intimacy through interface” or “intimacy without proximity”⁹ --while VNS Matrix does much the same, Stelarc’s implementation is much more dispassionate. In addition, while Stelarc’s emotional detachment in his performances with strongly implied political themes (such as Re-Wired / Re-Mixed) allows for a more open audience interpretation, it also implies that the work is indifferent to the issues it represents (such as military surveillance and remote control, in the case of Re-Wired).

VIII. Conclusion

VNS Matrix and Stelarc approach the challenge of reinventing the human form from different angles; as a feminist collective, VNS Matrix cannot consider the human form outside of the “historically specific social matrix”¹⁰ from which they create. While some aspects of VNS Matrix’s work are problematic (for example, their trans-exclusionary symbolism), Stelarc’s total rejection of the inclusion of any political themes in his work gives it a shockingly sterile nature. Many of the politically charged topics that he avoids--such as gender, the military-industrial complex and its role in technology, surveillance, race, and class--already affect how many people currently experience the human form, and will likely not disappear with the advent of a cyborg state. By claiming to present a possible version of future of the body, and totally rejecting these aspects of human life, Stelarc is effectively participating in an erasure of experiences of the human form that have been affected by these political aspects. This divergence in the artists’ respective attempts to recreate life highlights the extent to which their fundamentally different understandings of the human form--Stelarc’s, based in science fiction evolution narratives, and

⁹ Stelarc, and Marquard Smith. "Animating Bodie, Mobilizing Technologies: Stelarc in Conversation." In *Stelarc*, 215-42. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

¹⁰ Reichle, Ingeborg. "Remaking Eden: On the Reproducibility of Images and the Body in the Age of Virtual Reality and Genetic Engineering." In *Cyberfeminism. Next Protocols*, 239-60. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004.

VNS Matrix's, based in gender bio-politics--influence their art. This divergence demonstrates the importance of critically analyzing futuristic narratives that are implicit in art, as they are reflective of presently-held views.

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