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DIGITAL
AESTHETICS

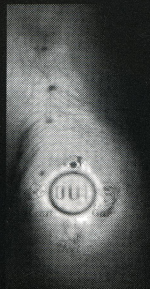
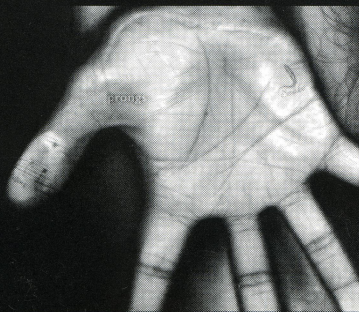
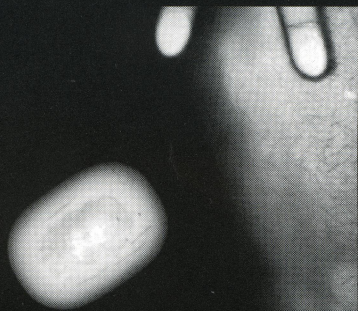
I v a n D o u g h e r t y G a l l e r y

23 March-13 April 1996



MutleyMedia

Graham Harwood



Zbigniew

Karkowski



Orlan



Stelarc



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new art and high technology

The five exhibits in this exhibition represent a broad mapping of a field which can be described as techno-media art. The exhibitors and the works selected have very different concerns from one another, but are unified by the fact that each has pushed the traditional boundaries, ideationally, conceptually and technically.

The "Cyberhype" surrounding the practice involving new and emerging technologies often fails to produce outcomes that can withstand serious analysis based on clarity of intention, elegance

of solution and, above all, value to the audience. The artists represented in this exhibition were chosen because they address each of these issues successfully with works which, despite their exploratory nature, indicate that the age of digital production produced loci of quality.

As this exhibition is a pilot event to the international symposium of the same name, it seems fitting that all exhibitors will also be represented at the symposium as speakers or panellists.

Werner Hammerstingl *President, C.A.T. & Exhibition Curator*

The body must burst from its biological, cultural and planetary containment. The significance of technology may be that it culminates in an alien awareness - one that is POST-HISTORIC, TRANS-HUMAN and even EXTRATERRESTRIAL. The first signs of an alien intelligence may well come from this planet."¹

It is with his usual exuberance that Stelarc relates verbal images of his recent Luxembourg Telepolis performance, in which the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Media Lab in Helsinki and the "Doors of Perception" conference in Amsterdam were electronically linked to his performance site in Luxembourg. "People in those cities could remotely access and activate my body", he enthuses. "We had ISDN picture-tel links, so I could see the face of the person who was moving me. They in turn could see the movements of the involuntary body. This was all uploaded to a live website so people browsing the internet could monitor the performance and download the images".²

In retrospect one can observe a relentless logic in Stelarc's exploration and use of his own body in his performance works, from his early suspension events to the most recent performances interfacing with technology and biology. He has even constructed a sculpture for the inside of his stomach. It is a structure that collapses into a kind of capsule form, is swallowed, then, using a kind of cable release, actually extends within the stomach. "The idea is that the sculpture is self-illuminating with at least one flickering LED and it has at least one sound emitting diode beeping away. It uses a number of medical techniques, like ultra-sound, cat scans, even x-rays, and, finally, an endoscope to actually see the thing in situ, in 3D", he states.⁷

The sculpture was exhibited as part of the 5th Australian Sculpture Triennial at the National Gallery of Victoria, having been surgically inserted and then removed in doctors' rooms in Footscray prior to its display. Video footage of the inside of Stelarc's stomach was

Digital Aesthetics-One is all about such experiences. The exhibition comprises artists from around the globe whose dedication to pioneering fresh ground with the "new technologies" remains unsurpassed. The one thing common to these artists is their single-mindedness in trailblazing these frontiers in the name of "art". There are no rules, only challenges, one writer being inspired to comment that he found the spectacle of Stelarc performing both moving and terrifying.³ While on the one hand there is Stelarc with his ear-shattering sounds of amplified brain waves, muscle and body movements, on the other there is composer Zbigniew Karkowski, whose goal is to expand music until there is nothing else but music.

Like Stelarc, Polish born Karkowski has performed with increasing regularity at "New Music" festivals around the world. Currently resident in Tokyo, Karkowski spends his time collaborating closely with Japanese noise artists. "In our culture there has always been a sharp distinction between 'music' and 'noise'", he states. "Well, to make it clear, music is a sound that you like and noise is a sound that you don't like or 'understand'. It is subjective. In reality, all sounds are nothing else but the result of vibration of materials. Sound is a presence of energy vibrating through space. Music must become aware of the subtleties of its effects. There is no doubt that the body's metabolism functions via a combination of electrical frequencies, pulse rates and biochemical hormones. The brain is dependent on input. There is nothing else but sound, all that exists is vibration".⁴ To this end, he has worked actively as a composer of instrumental music, developing monumental psychoacoustic dramas with erstwhile Bad Seed, Blixa Bargeld.

But it is on behalf of all the participants in this exhibition that French performance artist Orlan has stated, "J'ai donne mon corps a l'art" ("I have given my body to art").⁵ Orlan's current project utilises the technology of plastic surgery as a medium with which to articulate self-transformation. Art becomes its means. Since 1990 she has undergone a number of cosmetic surgeries designed to transform her likeness to that of nominated Renaissance artworks. At this stage she has the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the mouth of Boucher's Europa and the forehead of the Mona Lisa. After seven such "operations" (or performances) Orlan will commission an advertising agency to create for her a new name. Using photography, video and her own body, she combines art history, medical technology and mass communications to challenge traditional notions of female beauty and identity.

Like Orlan, world-renowned performance artist Stelarc has also long given his body to art. And, like Orlan on the one hand, it is his groundbreaking use of medical technologies which has brought him acclaim. Performing at Ars Electronica in Linz in 1992, Stelarc employed an interactive video set-up, where the body was able to switch between six cameras, one of which provided live internal images of the inside of his stomach. Previous to this he had made three films of the inside of his body, but not in a live performance situation.

"I had to swallow an 80cm long endoscope into the stomach. The pictures began, really, with the mouth opening and then the images of going down the throat, past the epiglottis and finally into the stomach. The images were quite interesting and I think being able to switch using sensors on the different parts of the body, arms, head, legs, being able to switch between external images of the body and the inside of the stomach was quite intriguing", he recalls. "It was a real challenge to do this live. It took me five attempts to get this thing (the endoscope) down and keep it down. It was very uncomfortable, and, of course, you want to expel the thing. It's not simply that it hurts. It's involuntary. You've got involuntary stomach and throat actions going on that try to force this thing out".⁶

shot while the sculpture was inside him. As one commentator has pointed out, Stelarc and Orlan are the living gross anatomical experimenters who will be shaping and refining the post human.⁸ Not as objects of digitalising standard, but as the inventors, using digital technology to create the future.

According to author and curator Jeffrey Deitch, a new post human organisation of personality will develop that reflects people's adaptation to this new technology and its socio-economic effects.⁹ He warns that future genetic manipulation may spawn a race of post humans who are outwardly perfect but whose inner neuroses and instincts may not be so easily controlled, and believes that it is artists who will be sensitive to this murky underside of displaced urges which may not be quite so easy to remould as a pair of flabby thighs. British artist Graham Harwood may well be his case in point.

Harwood has constructed a portentous interactive CD ROM, *Rehearsal of Memory*, documenting his residency at the Ashworth Maximum Security Hospital in the UK. In association with the patients and staff at the Hospital, Harwood brings Deitch's "murky underside of displaced urges" to the fore. The artwork records the lives of the staff/patient group which acts as a mirror to ourselves ("normal" society) and to our amnesia when confronted with society's excesses. This interactive work confronts the user (viewer) with a close-up view of the bodies of people we believe to be inmates or patients. For some this can be a nightmare that reconstitutes misinformation and fear about insanity. Click on any scar or tattoo and the story behind it unfolds. You are in the mind (and body parts) of the murderer.

If Jeffrey Deitch's assumption that more and more people are becoming more comfortable in the artificial world than the real one is correct,¹⁰ MutleyMedia should prosper from their participation in Digital Aesthetics-One. At \$4 a go (\$6 for three people), BoothLite, the limited-operations version of their Booth project in this exhibition, will do great business. MutleyMedia was recently formed by a core group of new media artists, Kathryn Bird, Grant Hilliard, Andrew Howie and James Verdon, specifically to produce the Booth project.

The Booth looks much like any photo-booth, the tiny cubicle with the half-curtain, the strips of photos on the outside. You enter, take your seat, maybe adjust its height. In front of you, set into the wall, is a 14" touch-screen monitor. On putting your \$4 in the coin slot, the screen tells you that your live video is being fed from the inside of the booth to the booth's website. You're in cyberspace: anyone logged onto the Boothsite is watching you and the next step is up to you. According to Grant Hilliard, BoothLite demonstrates the essence of the Booth idea, pointing to its various functions, capabilities and potential.¹¹ Taking its cue from vendor culture, BoothLite happily co-exists alongside Coca-Cola, condom and other vending machines in public places, providing the user with a photographic souvenir of their visit to cyberspace, along with the condom and can of Coke the visitor is free to purchase. A plethora of \$2 coins is recommended.

Digital Aesthetics-One is no ordinary exhibition. Do not expect the pristine sanctity of the white cube. Do not expect to be left alone to contemplate in quiet solitude, for here there is both sight and sound. Here the viewer mutates into interactive user, with touch-screens to touch, "mouses" to click, and a range of vending machines to try. This is the interactive world of digital empathy. Or, in the words of the "Goddess of Cyberspace", Allucquere Rosanne Stone, "we 'become technology' not really in the sense in which we go out into the wires, but in a deeper sense - in the sense that we don't only become resident in a communication technology, we become resident in technology in the large".¹² Cyberpunks rejoice!

endnotes

1. Stelarc, quoted in "Enhanced Gesture/Remote Desire: Post Evolutionary Strategies", booklet accompanying CD Stelarc, Anckarstrom, Göteborg, 1992
2. conversation with the artist, March 1996
3. see McKenzie Wark "Post Human ? All too Human", World Art, vol.1, no.1, 1994, pp.58-65
4. Artist's statement, "The Method is Science, The Aim is Religion", Amsterdam, March 1992
5. Orlan, quoted in McKenzie Wark, "Post Human ? All too Human", op.cit.
6. interview with Stelarc, Gotham City Gossip, Radio 3RRR-FM, Melbourne, 18 July 1992
7. ibid.
8. Werner Hammstingl (unpublished), Melbourne 1996
9. quoted in Wark, op.cit.
10. ibid.
11. conversation with the artist, March 1996
12. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, quoted in Frances Dyson, "Liquid Identity", 21C, 1-96, p.72

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